Scandalous
PARK AVENUE PRINCE
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHORS
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AND
BROOKE BLAINE

scandalous park avenue prince

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OceanofPDF.com

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synopsis

Who are we? Like you even need to ask. We're the seven richer-than-sin legacies causing debauchery at the prestigious Astor University in Manhattan.
Some call us spoiled.
Some call us trouble.
But *everyone* calls us the Park Avenue Princes.

Preston Abernathy
"The Perfect Guy"

When people look at me, I know what they see.
-a model student
-senator's son with a shining future in politics

-Serena Carrington’s boyfriend
-the studious, polite, dependable Park Avenue Prince

But sometimes looks can be deceiving. Because I’m hiding a secret. A *big* one. One that could shake the very foundation of the Upper East Side elite.

My secret has dark blond hair and a smile that could charm the pants off anyone—including mine. Charismatic. Powerful. Unbelievably gorgeous, with a body I fantasize about—not that they will ever know. This secret is one I’ll take to the grave.

Because, you see, I *am* in love with a Carrington, just not the one I’m dating.
And what’s a bigger scandal than falling for your girlfriend’s dad?

Scandalous Park Avenue Prince is the third standalone novel in the Park Avenue Princes world.

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Thank You
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prologue

Mid- to late October
The night of the Elysium charity event

“PRESTON! SERENA! LOOK over here.”

Photographers shouted at us from where they stood behind a velvet rope while I led my girlfriend, Serena Carrington, down the red carpet ahead of Elysium’s latest charity event. It was a necessary evil, doing this whole song and dance, putting ourselves out there to grace the gossip pages that followed Manhattan’s elite, all under the guise of raising money.

That was part of it, but the unspoken role was that we were the next generation that would rule the city, taking after our rich and influential

parents of the Elysium, the premier social club that wielded its influence over New York with an iron fist.

My fingers tightened around Serena's as we smiled for the cameras, and I knew exactly what it was they saw when they looked at us. The perfect couple. Students at prestigious Astor University for now, but following in the footsteps of our parents—mine a longtime politician and current senator, and hers the owner of the top theatrical agency in the country. Our paths were already laid out for us, and we played our parts to perfection.

Serena squeezed my hand back, and kept smiling as she said through her teeth, "How long do you think it'll be before they ask us—"

"When can we expect an engagement?" someone to our right shouted.

Aaand there it was. It didn't matter how many times we answered or ignored the question—it was the one we could rely on every time we walked a red carpet.

Or saw my parents.

What I *wanted* to often say was along the lines of *fuck off*, but that didn't suit the good-boy image I'd honed to perfection.

Thank God for the woman on my arm, the one who knew me better than anyone and also knew exactly how to move the attention elsewhere.

"We can't give away all our secrets, now can we?" Serena said, and then blew a kiss for the cameras. She pushed us forward, toward the end of the red carpet, keeping that smile on her face, her long blonde hair down around her shoulders making her look like a Hollywood starlet.

"Serena, is that a baby bump?"

She sucked in a sharp breath, and my gaze shot to the asshole photographer trying to get a rise out of us.

"Too far," I warned him. I tightened my grip on Serena, moving us off the red carpet and through the high wrought-iron gates of Elysium that led into a courtyard.

My tie strangled me, and I had to resist the urge to pull it off my neck as I muttered, "That fucking dick."

"I knew I shouldn't have had that extra slice of pie last night," she joked, but that only upped my annoyance at the piece of shit.

I stopped walking, jerking us to a halt. "Don't do that. You look beautiful."

She lifted a shoulder, but her smile didn't meet her eyes. "I know."

“Seriously, they only say that shit to get in our heads. Don’t let them.” When she only nodded, I added, “Want me to go kick his ass?”

Her brows rose at my attempt to lighten the mood. “Really. *You’re* going to go kick his ass?”

“Hey, I could do it.” I paused. “If I brought Daire.” His scowl alone would send anyone running.

She laughed, a genuine sound that had my shoulders relaxing. I didn’t want her thinking about that stupid comment all night, so if I could help get her mind off it, I would.

“I think I might have a better chance at an ass kicking,” she said, a smirk playing on her pink lips. “These heels could be a weapon.”

I glanced down at the shoes she wore, the heels several inches tall and as thin as a spike. “On second thought,” I said, “have at him.”

Shaking her head, she looped her arm through mine and tugged us toward the entrance of the grand four-story building that took up half a city block on the Upper East Side. “You’re supposed to be the good influence here, not encouraging me to commit a felony.”

“Some acts of violence are warranted.”

As we entered the main hall, where chandeliers cast a golden hue over the multicolored marble floors and walls and elaborately decorated tables were set up with precision, the sound of hundreds of people milling about greeted us. I’d had a hand in putting the event together, always quick to volunteer before my parents could suggest me for the job, and with the hall filled almost to capacity, I could see that we’d nailed the aesthetic.

“It looks beautiful,” Serena said, taking a moment to look around. “You and dad make a great team.”

My eyes cut to the formal greeting line where the head members of the Elysium stood welcoming their guests, and there standing at the front of the line was her father—and the president of the Elysium—Archer Carrington.

The very definition of debonair, Mr. Carrington wore a tuxedo better than any man I knew. His dark blond hair was styled back from his handsome face, showing off his chiseled jaw line, and the smile he aimed at every person he greeted was one full of confidence and charm.

I schooled my features to a friendly, polite mask, knowing we were up next, and as Serena guided us forward, the nerves I’d felt out on the red carpet returned.

“Well, hello there, gorgeous.”

As her father reached for her shoulders and leaned in to kiss her cheek, I stood aside and watched the display of affection with a knot in the pit of my stomach, because I had a secret, one bigger than engagements or babies, one that would cause a scandal unlike any this city had ever seen.

You see, I was in love with a Carrington—just not the one I was dating.

"Hey, Dad. I was just telling Preston what a great team you two make. The place looks amazing."

Mr. Carrington's attention shifted to where I stood, and as our eyes locked, my pulse skyrocketed.

"I agree, we do make a great team." He smiled then, and I struggled to return it. "I couldn't have done it without him."

I stepped up beside Serena, reminding myself I had a role to play as I wrapped an arm around her waist. "It was no problem. You know I don't mind helping out."

Mr. Carrington chuckled, and the rough rumble vibrated through me as he clapped me on the arm.

"I appreciate that. I know it's the last place you kids want to be spending your time."

Now that was a laugh. If he knew how quickly I volunteered to help out with every single event, he might start to wonder what the hell was wrong with me.

He'd never guess, though. The truth was nowhere on his radar.

"Are you kidding?" Serena grinned up at me. "Preston's always asking if you need help."

Unless, of course, my girlfriend decided to tell him.

Well, he still wouldn't guess the truth. Just that I was a lame-ass with no life.

"I figure my parents will volunteer me anyway, so why not just save them the time."

Mr. Carrington leaned in a little closer to me, and my heart just about stopped. Jesus, did he have to smell so damn good?

"And also to get on their good side?"

Yeah, sure, that sounded plausible. "You know it."

He nodded and looked down the line to where my parents stood, then turned back to me and smirked. "Your secret's safe with me. Does that mean I should sign you up for the Winter Ball?"

"Dad." Serena rolled her eyes. "Come on, he just finished this."

“It’s okay.” I squeezed her waist, letting her know it really was. Hell, it was more than okay, not that I was going to tell her that. “I’d love to help out.”

“Great. I’ll put it on my calendar and let you know when.”

I nodded and did my best not to smile like a lovesick fool, but seriously, more time with Mr. Carrington? Sign me up.

We finished making our way through the line, and once my parents had fawned enough over Serena, we grabbed a couple of drinks each at the bar and found the table that had been reserved for “the Park Avenue Princes,” as my group of friends and I were known.

It was the first time we’d gone to an event with other couples, since West had officially started dating JT, the dean of Astor’s son, and Donovan—better known as Van—was currently serving up a distraction by bringing his current interest, Kelly Sinclair, to show off. If any of the members here knew Kelly was actually a porn star that went by the name Sin, it would no doubt cause a massive scene, but both couples were currently keeping the heat off me and Serena, so I settled back in my chair, sipping on a much-needed glass of champagne.

From where I sat, I had a prime view of a certain someone’s table, a detail I’d made sure to arrange when helping with the seating assignments. It was pathetic, really, and I was glad no one else was privy to my inner thoughts, or they’d pity me too. Or think I’d lost my damn mind. Probably both.

Serena’s hand was suddenly on my thigh, giving me a quick squeeze, and then she leaned in by my ear, keeping her voice low and only for me.

“Did you see the guy who just walked in? Navy tux.”

I brought my glass up to my lips and casually looked in the direction of the entrance. The man didn’t look at all familiar, but that wasn’t why she was pointing him out to me. Tall, dark, and handsome, that was why. Whoever he was, he’d surely get the attention of many in the room, and maybe even mine if things had been different. If my entire being wasn’t currently focused on a certain blond man I still kept track of out of the corner of my eye.

“Not bad,” I said under my breath before taking a sip. “You should go for it.”

“I didn’t mean for *me*.”

“Why not?”

She smirked, her gaze moving to mine. “I’ve seen him before, and let’s just say I’m not his type.”

“Ridiculous. You’re everyone’s type.”

“And *you’re* good for my ego.” She leaned into me, grinning, and I once again found myself thankful for our friendship. To everyone else, it was a hell of a lot more than that, but Serena was my best friend, my confidante, and that went both ways. We were there for each other no matter what and didn’t hold anything back…at least, we hadn’t until the crush I harbored for her father had gotten a little out of hand. That wasn’t something I was dying to tell her, and didn’t plan to, since nothing would ever come of it.

The sound of chimes alerted the guests to direct their attention toward the front of the room, and I knew before looking who I’d find standing there.

Mr. Carrington kept his welcome speech short and to the point, managing to charm the crowd who’d paid an obscene amount of money to attend. Once the first course rolled out, he finally took his seat alongside the other Elysium board members, and every now and then I’d let my gaze travel to his table to see him smiling and laughing, though I couldn’t imagine what any of those uptight types could say that would be so funny.

That was the thought I was having during the appetizer when he looked up suddenly, his eyes catching mine and immediately relaxing into something familiar. I went completely still, but then he smiled at me, and I couldn’t help but return it. When he looked at me, it jumbled my insides and I had no clue how anyone around couldn’t see it.

“Oh fuck no,” Serena said, and for a heartbeat I thought she had noticed, that the last secret I’d kept from her was out, but no. Her attention was on someone approaching her father from behind, and her narrowed gaze said it wasn’t someone she liked.

“What’s wrong?”

“Not what, *who*.” She leaned in close and nodded in the direction of the man in the black velvet tux now stopping behind her father’s chair. He had shiny, slicked-back hair that was as dark as midnight, and it shone under the chandeliers. “Stuart Galloway. My dad’s ex. Ugh, this is so not going to end well.”

I narrowed my eyes on the man as he placed his hand on Mr. Carrington’s shoulder and leaned down to say something by his ear.

I tightened my fingers on my champagne flute and was surprised the thing didn't shatter in my hand, as Serena's father stiffened in his seat and turned. The charming smile from earlier fell from his lips as he looked up at this Stuart asshole.

"I'm guessing things didn't end well?"

"That's an understatement."

I didn't dare take my eyes off the two men, as Mr. Carrington pushed to his feet to greet the newcomer. Ever the gentleman, he forced a smile, and having studied him as closely as I had, I could sense the tension in him as though it were my own.

"What happened?" I asked, not only for Serena's sake but my own. I wanted to know what kind of moron would end things with Archer Carrington, because if that had been me in his position, nothing on the planet would've stopped me from staying with that man.

"I don't really know all the details, but from what I could gather, he didn't like that Dad actually works for what he has. He was more about living a lifestyle than living a life. He wanted to travel and just have fun, whereas Dad—"

"Enjoys his job and works hard at it," I finished for her.

"Exactly. So Dad ended things."

My lips automatically curved at that little piece of information, as Mr. Carrington shook his head and put a hand on Stuart's arm, guiding him away from the table. Whatever the other man was saying, Mr. Carrington clearly didn't want others to hear.

Serena let out a sigh and took a sip of her drink. "This is the last thing Dad needs tonight. He hates people speculating about him and his private life, and Stuart knows it."

Something about that really pissed me off. Mainly because I knew how it felt to have others look at you and wonder. Feeling like you were constantly under a microscope was exhausting.

"Oh shitballs…" Serena said as Mr. Carrington held up a hand and then stepped around Stuart to walk out of the hall. "Damn it."

As Stuart walked over to the bar, I turned toward Serena, caught the look of concern on her face, and reached for her hand. "Hey, you okay? Do you want to go and find your dad? Check on him, maybe?"

"No, no." She shook her head, her blonde hair falling all around her shoulders. "He would be mortified to know I'd seen them arguing."

I could understand that—her father was a proud man. One who was usually suave and full of confidence. To know that anyone, let alone his daughter, had seen a crack in that polished façade would likely make whatever he was feeling a hundred times worse.

“But maybe you could go?” Serena suggested, and I almost choked on my drink.

“Me?”

“Yeah.” She swiveled in her seat and put a hand on my arm. “The second course is still being served, and it’d only take a few minutes. Maybe track him down and distract him with something event related so he doesn’t think I sent you.”

“Event related? Like what?”

“I don’t know.” She grimaced. “Maybe someone found a hair in their bisque.”

“Seriously? I don’t think that would make him feel better.”

“Okay, maybe not something food related.” She eyed the empty champagne flutes on our table, then the one in my hand. “What about something to do with the drinks? They’ve run out of Dom? What’s that, your second? I’m sure everyone’s guzzling it down. It could happen.”

As she talked about how I should go find—and console—her father, I drank my *third*, not second, glass dry, because there was nothing I’d like more than to make Archer Carrington feel better.

“Okay, okay. I’ll go find him.”

Her eyes filled with gratitude as I got to my feet, and something twisted in my gut—guilt.

“Thank you.”

I ran my fingers down her cheek, then left my date and friends, weaving my way between the groups of Elysium members gathered at their tables. I smiled and waved at several people who greeted me, but didn’t stop as I hurried through the hall in the direction I’d seen Mr. Carrington go.

I could do this. A quick checkup. Make sure he wasn’t consoling himself by getting blind drunk or thinking of hurling himself off the Elysium’s top-floor balcony. Then I could go back to Serena and tell her everything was fine.

Sure. No problem. But first, I had to find him.

I exited the main hall and through the foyer, and was about to head upstairs to his office when I heard a noise close by.

There were a couple of recreational areas off the east side of the foyer, cigar and billiards rooms, and as I started in that direction, I found Mr. Carrington sitting in one of the private alcoves that lined the hallway.

“Preston.”

Mr. Carrington got to his feet, and my eyes fell to the glass in his hand. I wondered if that was his first or second pour, and I figured that was as good a segue as any to get him talking.

“Needed something stronger than champagne tonight? I thought it was a fully stocked bar.”

Mr. Carrington blinked then looked to the glass in his hand. “It is. I just needed to toss a couple back and didn’t want anyone to see.”

That’s what I thought. Always the professional. Always the gentleman. There were plenty of members who would be fall-on-their-ass drunk from the open bar tonight, but Archer Carrington wouldn’t be one of them. Even if his moron ex had shown up to crash the party.

“No one would care,” I said, stepping out of the hall and into an alcove barely big enough for the clubman chair and side table that was nestled into it.

“Yes, but I would.” He let out a sigh, and something about the vulnerable response had me remembering why I was there.

“Are you all right?”

His eyes shot to mine, and his lips parted like a denial was on the tip of his tongue. Something in my expression must’ve made him change his mind, though, because he shook his head. “I guess you noticed Stuart.” He swirled the contents of his glass. “Just another reminder I’m going to end up old and alone at Christmas.”

As he threw back another mouthful, the buzz of alcohol had my ears ringing. My first inclination was to refute what he’d just said, because how the hell could someone like him ever think he *didn’t* have a long line of guys kicking down the door to get to him?

And I was the one there. With him. Not in a line, not behind a door, but only a few feet away, close enough I could take a couple steps forward and have my hands on him.

No. That was crazy. *Don’t think about touching him.*

My body wasn’t listening to my brain, though, because before I could stop myself, I’d closed the gap between us. I wrapped my hand around his

on the glass, and surprise lit his warm brown eyes before they settled into something I recognized all too well, just not from him.

Heat.

I didn't take my eyes off him as I gently took the glass from him and lifted it to my own lips. Was it wrong I wanted a taste of him any way I could get it, even if it was only my mouth touching the place his had been?

In the back of my mind, I could hear the muffled shout of "yes," but the whiskey making its way down my throat washed it away. My heart pounded as his eyes dropped to my mouth, and I waited for him to move away—to realize we were too close, that the energy in the room had changed into something so full of sexual tension that my dick was thrumming with it, punching against the confines of my pants.

But he didn't step back. He stayed right there, a breath away, watching me so intently I could practically feel his hands on me.

God, I wanted his hands on me.

I swallowed down the rest of his whiskey, licked the remnants off my lips, and stopped breathing when I thought Mr. Carrington—fuck it—*Archer's* head moved toward me.

Maybe I'd been seeing things. Maybe it was all the alcohol I'd consumed in the short span of time we'd been here. Or maybe it was just that I wanted this man so goddamn much that I threw common sense aside and made a move.

"No," I said, my voice resolute. "You're perfect."

I reached for him, curving my free hand around the back of his neck, bringing him forward those few precious inches until his mouth met mine.

The moment I felt the soft press of his lips, he went stock-still, but it lasted such a brief moment, not even a heartbeat, that I didn't have time to panic that I'd made a mistake.

Archer's tongue flirted along my lower lip, then slipped inside, and before I could even start to process…I was kissing him and *he* was kissing *me*.

A soft groan rumbled out of me, all of my pent-up desire for this man racing to the surface as I tightened my fingers at the back of his neck. I sucked on the tongue now plundering my mouth as confidently as everything else this man did and closed my eyes, never wanting this kiss to end.

This kiss that was unlike any other I'd had before.

This kiss that was *obliterating* any other I'd had before.

As the smooth taste of whiskey and Archer mixed into a potent blend, I swallowed it down, knowing I had no hope of fighting it.

Jesus. This was the last thing I'd expected when I was sent to track him down. He turned us in the alcove and my back hit the wall. Archer's foot moved between mine, and I immediately shifted my legs apart.

How long had I wanted this? Too long to stop or push him away, that was for damn sure. So when his tongue rubbed against mine, my hips shot forward, and the erection he'd inspired rubbed up against his thigh.

The rational part of my brain was a distant memory now as I chased after what I'd wanted—no, *craved*—for years, even though I knew it was wrong. And when his hand moved between us and down over my straining pants, a throaty groan left him.

Fuck. Yes. Touch me. Please, keep touching me.

I would've begged him to, but that would require me to take my lips off his, and nothing short of—"Holy fuck!"—an outside voice intruding and making my world implode could've gotten me to stop in that moment.

Wait—what?

At the sound of my friend Travis's shocked outburst, Archer and I froze. The realization that someone was witnessing this moment was a shock to *all* our systems.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuuuck.

Travis's eyes ping-ponged between us as his mouth tried to form words. But I quickly extricated myself from between the wall and Archer—Mr. Carrington—before the situation could go from bad to worse.

How in the hell had I let this happen?

Oh, I know—too much alcohol, Mr. Carrington looking at my lips like he wanted to taste them, and then my giving in and *offering* him that taste.

I needed to get Travis the hell out of there. I *needed* to work out some kind of explanation for everything, and I needed to do it all quick.

Mr. Carrington's cheeks looked flushed, and I wasn't sure if it was from the alcohol, the kiss, or being caught. But, not about to stick around and find out, I thrust the tumbler into his hand and hurried out to Travis, his jaw practically on the floor.

When I grabbed his arm and started to tug on it, Travis stumbled back a step and then turned.

"Was that Serena's—"

“No.” I didn’t bother looking at him as I began to march him down the hall.

“And were you just—”

“No.”

“Wait—does that mean you’re *gay*?”

I jerked us to a stop in the foyer and turned to face my wide-eyed roommate and friend, and something in my expression had his shock turning downright devious.

“Oooh you got *sooo* many secrets…”

“You can’t tell anyone.”

“But—”

“No. One.”

Travis bit down on his lip and narrowed his kohl-lined eyes on me.

Fuck me. I was so screwed.

“Okay, I won’t tell anyone. But you have to tell me everything. That includes all the juicy details.”

“I—”

“*Everything*, Preston. Or forget it.”

“Fine. I’ll tell you.” I let out a sigh and thought that at least I’d have *someone* to talk to about this. “But you have to promise not to tell anyone else.”

“Consider my lips sealed. But, um, one thing before I shut the fuck up.”

Oh God, what now?

“You might want to wait a couple of minutes before heading back to the table, or everyone might think you’re *really* happy to have ordered the langoustines tonight.”

His eyes dropped to the hard-on still pressing against my zipper, and I quickly covered it with my hands.

“Always figured you were packing, but damn, Preston. That’s impressive.”

“Really?”

Travis chuckled as he backed away toward the main hall. “Be nice to *meee*. I know your secret now, Mr. Abernathy.”

That was true, but two could play at that game, and Travis wasn’t half as good at hiding his secrets as I was.

“That might be. But I think I saw a certain photographer outside tonight. Maybe I could convince Caleb to come in and keep your mouth shut for

me.”

That smug smirk fell from Travis’s lips and told me that the shot I’d fired had hit its mark.

“Low blow, asshole.”

“Just reminding you that I’m not the only one with secrets.”

Travis flipped me off and headed inside, as I looked down at my dick and willed it into submission.

I might not be the only one hiding a secret, but it was definitely the most scandalous.

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ONE

archer

Present day - Late November

I GLANCED AT the time in the corner of my computer screen to see it was closing in on seven p.m. The rest of the office had long since gone home, but my workload was overflowing, and as CEO of CTA— Carrington Talent Agency—I didn't have the luxury of clocking in and out. I wished someone had told me that fun fact when I decided to branch out on my own. Between managing talent and contracts and then heading up the Elysium, it was…a lot. Probably too much, but for the moment, I could handle it. It wasn't like I had other commitments outside of work, especially with Serena having moved out a few weeks ago.

It was just me, my work, and I.

Fuck, that was depressing. But it kept me too busy to think about it much, which was another reason I kept piling on more responsibilities.

There was a knock on my door, and when my assistant, Sasha, poked her head inside, I frowned.

"I thought you'd gone home already. It's late."

"You know I wouldn't leave you with appointments still lined up. Your last one is here now."

My fingers stilled on the keyboard. "Another one? With who?" I hadn't bothered to check my schedule, but I'd assumed I hadn't been crazy enough to book anything late on a Friday.

Apparently not.

“Preston Abernathy. Would you like me to send him in now or have him wait?”

I didn’t hear anything she said after the first two words because every fiber in my body froze. *Fuck.* I couldn’t meet with Preston. Not here. Not alone. I’d only seen him in passing or with Serena since the night of the charity ball, when I’d lost my ever–loving mind.

Shit, shit, shit. What the hell was he doing here? And how could I get rid of him without making it too obvious?

“Mr. Carrington?” Sasha’s brow furrowed, and I forced myself to shake off my unease and give her a tight smile.

“Did he say what he needed? Maybe it’s something you can take care of, since I’m swamped.”

“Actually, sir, you scheduled this appointment a while back. Regarding the Elysium’s Winter Ball.” When I inwardly cursed myself, her frown deepened. “Should I reschedule?”

“Yes. No.” *Fuck.* What were the odds he’d forgotten about that night? I still had no good explanation for what had come over me. Christ, just thinking about kissing my daughter’s boyfriend now made me cringe, even as my traitorous body heated at the memory.

Which was why I’d shut down all thoughts regarding Preston in the weeks since. Nothing good could come from remembering his lips on mine—

I rubbed my forehead, squeezing my eyes shut, and sighed. Despite this not being a good idea—at all—I couldn’t deny I needed the help for the Winter Ball. And he was already here…

“Send him in,” I said, before I could change my mind.

“Will do. Is there anything else you need before I go?”

My head jerked up. “You’re leaving?”

“I’ve got dinner plans with Harvey.” She smiled at the mention of her husband, but then it dimmed a little. “Unless you need me to stay?”

“No, no, of course not. I appreciate your working late, but go enjoy the weekend.”

She nodded but hesitated in the doorway. “Are you sure?”

I tried to ignore the panic in my chest and forced a smile. “Yes, now go. And tell Harvey I said hello.”

“Thank you. Don’t work too late.”

“No promises.”

As she left to go get Preston, I saved the file I'd been working on and ran my sweaty palms over the top of my tailored pants.

God, get it together. You're the adult here.

I stared at the half-cracked door, my heartbeat counting down the seconds as I did my level best to compose myself. I was a professional, for fuck's sake. The owner of this damn company. If I couldn't handle a conversation with a college kid, then I might as well throw in the towel right now.

The quick rap of knuckles on the door did nothing to slow my pulse before Preston appeared. He filled my doorway dressed in a pair of tailored grey pants, black turtleneck sweater, and peacoat, and the whole "kid" angle flew right out the fucking window.

When he stepped inside my office and went to shut the door behind him, I got to my feet. "You can leave that open."

Preston's arm froze and dropped to his side, and his caramel-colored eyes narrowed a fraction.

"Okay." He grabbed the strap of his messenger bag, but otherwise didn't move. "Should I also stay standing over here?"

I wasn't sure if it was my paranoia or something else, but I could've sworn there was a hint of…mocking in his tone.

No, it had to be me. Preston was nothing if not polite. Always respectful. Like me, he had put that moment of insanity in a box and locked it, and, like it was some unspoken agreement, we had never mentioned it or talked about it since.

Granted, I'd been doing everything in my power to avoid any time alone with him. But the couple of occasions we had seen one another, it had been cordial…normal. Now would be no different.

"No, of course not. Come in, take a seat. I was just wrapping things up for the day."

"For the day? You do see it's night out there, right?"

I sat back down and busied myself with nothing in particular, because that was safer than watching Preston cross my office and sit down opposite me. Serena had been dating him for how long? And suddenly I couldn't look at him without noticing things like how long his legs were, how thick his windswept hair was, and how full those lips that I'd had pressed up against—

No. I was *not* going to think about that.

“I do, actually.” I glanced out of my office window to the city lights surrounding our building. “If I’m being honest, I was about to head home. I’d forgotten we even had a meeting.”

“Ouch, talk about a blow to the ego.”

My attention shifted back to Preston to see a smile tugging at the corner of his lips.

“And here I’d been counting down the days.”

My breath caught as that smile spread to his eyes, and I realized that box I thought we’d locked and set aside had just been reopened—by him.

Not about to touch that comment with a ten-foot pole, I decided to do the mature thing and ignore it altogether. “We really do need to get things up and running for the Winter Ball, so it’s a good thing I scheduled it after all.”

Preston crooked his head a fraction, eyeing me closely, and I made sure to keep my expression neutral.

Then he nodded. “That’s why you’re the boss. Tell me what you need.”

Jesus, why did everything he said seem to have a double meaning? Or maybe that was me? *Fuck.* I felt like some confused, nervous teenager.

What did I need? I needed a stiff drink and to get Preston Abernathy out of my office before I said something I would regret.

“Archer?”

At the sound of my name—my *first* name—coming out of Preston’s mouth, any talk of Winter Balls and schedules left my head.

This extra familiarity he seemed comfortable taking with me needed to stop. It was exactly what I was afraid of. Time to put my foot down.

“You mean *Mr. Carrington*, don’t you?”

He blinked once and then gave me a polite nod. “Of course. My apologies…Mr. Carrington.”

Shit, now why did even *that* somehow sound sexual?

I cleared my throat, desperately needing a glass of anything, but drinking was how we’d ended up in such an…*entanglement* before.

One click of a button and the folder Sasha had organized for me appeared on the screen—all the details for the Winter Ball segmented out by who’d volunteered. No one received compensation for their roles, choosing to help out to win my good graces, be considered for a position on the board during the next election, or to suggest their own companies for what would be a massive payday, if they were chosen.

Preston had none of those reasons for being here, for volunteering to help with any of our past events or this one, other than his parents putting him up to it. He'd never acted like it was a chore, though, even though I knew how much time it took away from things he'd much rather be doing. No one in their junior year of college was dying to spend hours putting together an event for a mostly older crowd.

I printed the list that Sasha had marked with Preston's name and then sent it to his email as well. It wasn't like this was our first time working together, but it felt different now.

Preston reached for the printed papers before I could. "Thank you."

As he scanned the long to-do list, I scanned him. His chestnut-colored hair was swept back from his face in a perfectly polished way that, along with his very Upper East Side attire, said he wanted to be taken seriously. Dark brows pulled together as he read over the list. My eyes trailed down his face and locked on his full bottom lip.

Before *that* night, I'd never really looked at Preston before. Not that way. Obviously I'd noticed he was a good-looking guy, but only in the way that you'd appreciate someone as you passed them on the street. He'd always been so well mannered when I saw him, even when he was at my house with Serena. More on the quiet side, no hint of the immoral behavior his group of friends were known for.

Though we were who we hung out with, weren't we?

And after that night, it was clear Preston wasn't just a shy, deferential type. Not with that wicked flicker he'd had in his eyes when he walked in here tonight.

I was so fucked.

Needing something to do with my hands, I clasped them on the desk in front of me and tried to remain unaffected by the change in energy I'd felt since he arrived.

"Does that work for you?" I said. "If you'd prefer to hand this event off to someone else, I'm sure I could find—"

"No." He looked up at me. "I can handle this."

I should've been relieved, since he was one of the people I could count on to get things done, regardless of his age, but having him in such close proximity, working together on this for the next few weeks…it would be complicated.

Unless it didn't have to be.

“As you lock down quotes, I’ll have you report them to Sasha, and she’ll go over them with me—”

“Wait, I’m not reporting directly to you?”

I gestured to my meticulously stacked, but at capacity, desktop. “As you can see, I’m a little busy.”

A hint of a smirk crossed his lips. “Riiight. A little busy for me, you mean.”

“That’s not what I—”

“You’ve never been too busy before.”

It was all I could do to keep my calm, because he knew exactly the why of it all, and I wasn’t going to spell it out for him.

Keeping my hands clasped, I kept my tone friendly and casual. “This is the event of the year for the Elysium. I’ll have to delegate if I want things to flow smoothly.”

“You mean you’ll have to delegate *me* because you don’t trust yourself to be alone with me.”

My breath caught in my throat as my gaze bounced from the open door of my office back to Preston. “Excuse me?”

“What? Worried someone will hear?” He moved to the edge of his seat and slapped the papers on top of the desk. “No one else is around. You can be honest with me now.”

There was no way in hell I could be honest about what I was thinking, and definitely not about what I was feeling. But the fact he was calling me out on it meant I was in a world of trouble—because he was feeling it too.

“Look, I’ve had a long week, and I’d really like—”

“Me to leave? To stay? To kiss you again?”

“That’s enough.” I pushed to my feet in an effort to regain some control of the situation. “I think you should leave.”

Preston slowly got to his feet, his gaze unwavering as he eyed me across the desk. “I’ll leave if you’ll be honest with me.”

“This is ridiculous.”

“You pretending we didn’t kiss? Or that you didn’t enjoy it?”

I gritted my teeth and sucked in a breath, pinching the bridge of my nose in an effort to calm myself. “I’m not talking to you about this.”

“Why not? I’m the one that was there.”

“I know.” The two words came out much harsher than I’d anticipated, but what did he expect? I was doing my level best to get through this

meeting and get him the hell out of my office. But he kept pushing and pushing.

"Then why can't we talk about it?"

"Because you're my daughter's *boyfriend*," I snapped, letting out a sigh as I ran a hand through my hair. The weight of what I'd just said, the guilt of that one confession, twisted in my gut like a knife.

"Am I?"

My head jerked up, and I glared at the gorgeous face watching me with laser focus. "What does that mean?"

Preston's lips curved into a smile I didn't quite understand as he scooped up the papers on my desk and then turned for his bag. As he slung the strap over his shoulder, he slipped the papers inside and turned back to where I still stood, frozen in place, waiting for…

Fuck if I knew.

"What does that mean, Preston?"

"It means that before you start delegating me to others, you should talk to your daughter. Because if that's all that's stopping you from taking what you clearly want—and yeah, I know when a man wants me—then maybe Serena should come clean about what's really going on between us."

What was he talking about? Him and Serena had been a couple for years. None of this made any sense. How would he know if a *man* wanted him? That *I* wanted him?

I was confused, irritated, and undeniably turned on as he patted his bag.

"I'll get to work on this list and see you on Monday to talk figures, *Mr. Carrington*."

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TWO

preston

“HAVE YOU GIVEN any more thought to coming down to D.C. next term?” my father asked the next evening as he signed the check at the ultra-exclusive Fin.

I repressed a sigh as I reached for my wine glass and drained the rest of the final pairing we’d gotten with our chef’s menu dinner. My father, Senator Fredrick Abernathy, had been asking the same question for all three years I’d been at Astor, and other than a few quick weekend trips, I’d managed to avoid going down there. It wasn’t exactly all fun and games in the political world, and spending summers in Europe or on a beach with my friends was far more entertaining.

I’d be following in his footsteps soon enough. I didn’t need to spend the rest of my college years commuting to network with his colleagues.

Serena’s hand found mine on the table, giving me a reassuring squeeze. Thank God I had someone in my life who actually knew me well enough to know D.C. was the last place I wanted to be right now.

I set my glass back on the table and cleared my throat. “I’m not sure. I haven’t received my final course schedule yet, and I’ve promised Mr. Carrington I’d head up a committee for the winter and spring events at Elysium.”

My mother looked up, a pleased smile on her elegant face. “That’s wonderful, dear.”

She wouldn’t think so if she knew what I really wanted to do with Mr. Carrington.

“He can do both,” my father said gruffly, getting to his feet, which meant the rest of us could finally do the same. “An Abernathy man has to be able to juggle. Elysium is important, but running the country is incomparable.”

Buttoning my suit jacket, I nodded and kept my mouth shut. It was better that way, and it would have my father thinking I silently agreed with him.

“Thank you so much for the wonderful evening,” Serena said as I helped her into her peacoat. When my mother came around the table, Serena gently took hold of her arms to kiss both her cheeks, and then she let go to shake my father’s hand.

Pride beamed from both of my parents as they smiled at the two of us. Serena was so perfect at this role, the embodiment of an ideal partner.

“You’re more than welcome.” My father brought her left hand up to plant a kiss there, and then looked pointedly at me. “Perhaps this Christmas will bring you something large and sparkling for this hand, hmm?”

My heart began to pound at the thought of an engagement, but Serena only gave a coy chuckle and pulled her hand away from my father to grab mine.

“I know you both are ready for grandkids, but we’d like to graduate first.”

My father arched a brow. “Again, *juggle*.”

I kept my mouth shut like the prize child I was as we said our goodbyes, and as my parents got into their car, we headed down Fifty-First Street for the short walk to the Waldorf Towers.

Serena let go of my hand as soon as their car was out of view, linking her arm through mine instead. “All right, you can breathe now.”

It was crazy that I needed the reminder, and as I sucked in the cold night air, my shoulders immediately relaxed. I’d been so good at playing this part for so long, but lately the pressure had been getting to me, making it harder to compartmentalize all the different parts of my life. Including the new addition of her father.

I looked down into a pair of warm brown eyes and smiled—my first genuine smile all night. “Thank you.”

“Of course. Can’t have you passing out on the sidewalk. You’re too heavy to drag.”

I snorted. “I meant for the whole night.”

“I know. But that’s what we do, right?”

“Right.” Breathing came much easier as we passed by the crowds out heading to Radio City Music Hall, moving out of their way as they all seemed to stop in the same spot to take pictures. The holidays were in full swing now, which meant more patience was required while out and about with the influx of tourists, but I couldn’t deny there was something special about this time of year and the way the city lit up.

“So,” I said as the entrance to the Towers came into view a few short minutes later. “You enjoyed dinner?”

“I enjoyed the wine.”

A smirk crossed my lips, because while Serena enjoyed seafood, the raw stuff wasn’t up her alley, though she did a great job faking it for my parents. “Guess it’s a good thing I ordered a pizza.”

“Sausage, bell pepper, and extra cheese?”

“Of course.”

She rested her head on my shoulder and grinned up at me. “It’s like you read my mind.”

“More like I know you as well as I know myself, and *I* am hungry.”

She laughed as the doorman of the Towers pulled open the door for us.

“Good evening, Mr. Abernathy.”

“Hey there, nice night out tonight.”

He nodded as he looked between us, a wide smile on his weathered face. “It is. Perfect night for a romantic walk through the city.”

“Isn’t it?” Serena agreed, casually slipping back into girlfriend mode as she patted my arm. “The night sky, the holiday atmosphere—the only thing missing was the snow.”

As the words rolled casually off her tongue, I thought the only thing missing for me was a certain someone. Mr. Carrington’s gorgeous face was an image that was too quick to come to mind. I remembered the way he tried not to look at me last night in his office but couldn’t seem to help himself when he thought I didn’t notice.

But I wasn’t supposed to be thinking about that. I was supposed to be focused on the *daughter*—not the father.

“You coming?” Serena tugged on my elbow. “Or do you plan to stand in the doorway all night?”

I shook off my wayward thoughts and headed through the lobby to the elevators. So much for keeping things in separate boxes.

It was a quick ride up to my floor, and as we stepped out into the hall, we saw the pizza guy about to knock on the door.

“Ah, perfect timing.” Serena reached for the box and inhaled the delicious aromas wafting out with a moan.

I chuckled, pulled a twenty from my wallet, and handed it to the guy. “Thanks. I haven’t fed her for a week.”

Serena rolled her eyes as the guy thanked me and got back inside our empty car.

“Really? A week?”

“The way you’re acting, maybe two. Would you like a moment alone with it?”

“You’re so funny,” she said as I opened the door for her, then tossed my wallet on the entry table.

“Hey, you’re the one acting like a—”

“Do I smell pizza?” Travis popped up from the couch. Then he looked over at where Serena clutched the box close to her body, like one would guard a baby.

“Don’t even think about it,” she warned as he eyed her prize, and had any other guy looked at her chest that intently, I might have jumped to her defense. But Travis was interested in only one thing, and that was the piping-hot pizza that had just been delivered—free of charge—to his door.

“What? You can’t even spare one piece? You’re tiny.”

“I’m also hangry,” she growled as she marched into the kitchen. “So back off.”

Travis looked over at me. “That time of the month?”

“I heard that!” Serena called out as I started to laugh and walked over to join Travis.

“No. We had dinner with my parents at—”

“Fin, and the food was basically raw and nonexistent.” Serena came back out of the kitchen with a couple cans of soda, then flipped open the lid of the pizza. “So this”—she waved at one side of the box—“is mine. And you two can fight over the rest.”

Travis held up his hands. “Uh, I think I’m just gonna get something when I head out in a few. I kinda like my balls where they are.”

“Preston will share with you,” she said around a mouthful, and I nodded.

“Seriously. If you want a piece, go for it.”

“Nah. Sounds like you two need it more than me.”

“Yeah, it was an interesting night for sure.” I reached for a slice and leaned back into the couch.

“Your dad bugging you about D.C. again?”

“D.C., marriage—”

“*Babies*…” Serena smiled sweetly, then sat up straight and posed beside me like a proper little wife might in a portrait. “Don’t you think we’d make the perfect couple?”

Travis snorted, looking between the two of us. “Maybe. If he didn’t like dick as much as you do. Which I’m still trying to wrap my head around.”

Serena laughed. “Thank God someone else finally knows.”

I shook my head and took a big bite of my slice. Since I’d gotten busted by Travis with Mr. Carrington, I’d had to come clean to him about my secrets, and he was now the only person who knew *everything*. I hadn’t breathed a word of that night to Serena, and neither had Travis. She’d easily bought the lie that since he was my roommate, it made sense to tell him the truth, to make it easier on the two of us.

Was I proud of myself for keeping the truth from her? No. Was I about to tell her I kissed her father and wanted to do it again? *Hell* no.

So what it came down to was there were two people in the world who knew my preferences, and both of them were in this room. It was the only time I could fully relax, but it wasn’t often that one of the other guys wasn’t around.

Would any of them care? Not in a million years. I got more shit from them for being the “straight” one of our group, but the more people who bought into my lie, the better. It wasn’t just my life and future I had to think about, but Serena’s.

Travis disappeared into his room for a couple of minutes while we sat there shoveling food into our mouths, and when he came back out in a different outfit, I whistled.

An impish grin crooked his lips. He knew he was hot shit, but Travis never turned down an opportunity to strut as we threw out compliments.

“So hot,” Serena said, as we took in the tight black and gold snakeskin pants with an open long-sleeved shirt. “Turn around.”

He made a show of rolling his eyes, but Travis had a spectacular ass and he knew it, which was why he obliged and made a full turn for our benefit.

Serena licked sauce off her finger and nodded. “Yeah, I’d bang you.”

“So would I, but…” I grinned at him, and Travis’s mouth fell open.

“Seriously? I don’t have to go out.”

“Yeah, but you might get obsessed with me, and I can’t have you giving me away by mooning over me in public. Besides, stalking one person at a time should be enough for you.”

Instantly, his eyes narrowed and he flashed me a finger. “Enjoy your trash food and romcoms, you lame-asses.”

He was out the door seconds later, and once it slammed shut behind him, Serena and I busted out laughing.

“That was mean,” she said as she grabbed another slice and curled her legs beneath her on the couch. “Aren’t you worried he’ll spill things if you’re a dick?”

“Nah. He’s got as many secrets as I do. The trust goes both ways.” I hoped.

“Hmm.” That was all she said as she picked a fallen piece of sausage off her lap and popped it in her mouth. I could practically see her thinking, and the longer she stayed quiet, studying me, the more questions I knew were coming.

I tossed the crust of my second slice in the box and reached for the remote to turn on a movie she’d like, but I’d barely started flipping through the channels before she broke the silence.

“Do you think you’ll ever want to spill your secrets?”

The question was so out of left field that I almost dropped the remote. “To who?”

She lifted a shoulder, looking anywhere but at me. “To whoever. Your other friends, for starters. And maybe…”

I narrowed my eyes. “Maybe what?”

“What if you find someone you want to spend your life with?”

Where the hell was this coming from? Had she caught wind that I’d been thinking about someone else lately? No, there was no way she could know that. And it wasn’t like I was thinking about forever.

“You know better than that,” I said. “But have *you* met someone? Is that what you’re trying to tell me?”

“No, I—”

“It’s that guy from Onyx, isn’t it? I saw him slip you his number.”

“Which I promptly threw in the trash, and you know it.”

I twisted slightly to face her, resting my elbow on the back of the couch. “What about that girl in your class, what’s her name…”

“Naya?”

“That’s the one.”

Serena shrugged. “What about her?”

“You tell me.”

“Preston, I’m not trying to get out of this. I’m just asking if *you’re* still happy with this arrangement.”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Well, a lot of your friends have been finding, dare I say, love lately. Sometimes that can make things stir, make you want something like that yourself.”

“Love?” I chuckled. “I’m happy with just a hit-and-run.”

“Stop it.” She smacked me on the arm. “You know what I mean. I’ve seen the way you look at Donovan and Kelly. You want what they have.”

“Doesn’t everyone? Those two are like a walking billboard for romance, no matter your preference.”

“Yes, but you specifically want what *they* have. To be open and out of the closet. To be able to hold hands and touch the man you care about.”

I let out a sigh and shrugged. “Yeah, well, he hasn’t shown up yet, so I’m not all that worried.”

“And when he does? Will you tell me?”

A frown pulled between my brows as I tried to ignore the sudden flush of heat that crept up the back of my neck. I *really* hated lying to her. “Of course. Just like you’ll tell me, right?”

“That was the deal.”

“I know. But I don’t want you to think that you have to hold back on my account.” I reached for a strand of her blonde hair and twirled it around my finger, redirecting the conversation away from my guilty conscience. “You mean the world to me, and your happiness is just as important to me as my own. So when you find someone, you better fucking tell me.”

The irony didn’t escape me.

A fun-loving laugh left her as she saluted me. “Yes, sir.”

“Good. So for now, we agree this situation is working just fine and we’re happy to leave it at that.”

“Happy as can be.” She grabbed another slice. “You sure you don’t want to tell your friends, though? Would be much easier to sneak off to see

Raul if they knew what kind of ‘massage’ you were running late for.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously. They’d be more than willing to cover for you so you could go get your happy ending.”

I picked up one of the cushions off the couch and tossed it at her. “You’re a damn troublemaker.”

She flopped back into the seat and bit down into her cheesy slice. “Yeah, but you love me anyway.”

She was right. I loved her with all my damn heart. In the way best friends do.

I couldn’t help the wave of guilt that washed over me again, though, as the memory of her father pushing me up against the wall and kissing the breath out of me intruded on my thoughts. I couldn’t reconcile what I was thinking and feeling, though if Archer didn’t ask Serena about the truth of our relationship, it didn’t seem like it would ever matter anyway.

But I’d felt that tension between us. It’d been real. And that spark of curiosity in his eyes as I’d left his office told me that maybe, just maybe, I had a chance.

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THREE

archer

“WHAT ARE WE thinking this year? A pine? Spruce? Our go-to fir?” I scanned the Christmas tree lot and picked up the one closest to me, a pretty greenish-blue spruce.

I glanced over my shoulder to where Serena stood, head tilted in thought as she looked over the tree.

“Well, that depends. Did you want something different?”

“Not necessarily.” I shook the branches, fluffing it out. “Just figured we should look at all our options.”

“Hah.” Serena’s lips twisted, amusement lighting her eyes. “You know you’re not going to buy that one.”

“Why would you say that? It’s nice, right? Good height.”

“Dad, please. Every year we go to a million different lots, we look at every tree they have, and you *still* walk away with a Douglas fir. *Every. Time.*”

I opened my mouth to deny that and then closed it when I realized she was right. I liked what I liked, even when I tried to be open-minded.

“Well, damn.” I laid the tree back down on top of the pile and threw my arm around her shoulders, tugging her into my side. “Since when did you get smarter than your old man?”

She laughed and wrapped her arm around my waist as we headed through the lot, past all the trees I *wouldn’t* be taking home. “Do you really want me to answer that?”

“Don’t make me ground you.”

“Hard to do when I don’t live with you anymore.” She grinned up at me, and I could only shake my head. It had been a few weeks since she’d decided to move in with her friends, leaving me all alone in a big brownstone that felt entirely too empty now. I knew it was the right move for her, but it didn’t mean I had to like it.

“Don’t remind me,” I grumbled, giving her a squeeze.

“Oh, come on, now you can actually bring your dates home instead of having to go to their place.”

My feet came to an abrupt halt and I blinked. “What?”

Serena rolled her eyes and tightened her hold on my waist, pulling me along with her as she began to move again. “Please don’t think I’ve turned into some sheltered halfwit. I’m well aware you have needs. The kind I don’t need to be around for.”

Thank fuck I wasn’t drinking anything, or I would’ve choked on it.

On second thought, I could use some alcohol right now if this was the conversation we were going to have.

When my mind continued to stutter instead of working out the ability to respond, she laughed.

“No way. Have I actually shocked you speechless?” A gloved hand went over her heart.

“Gonna take a lot more than that, Lovebug.”

“Oh, I can go there. What about that hot guy you went out with that wanted you to put your—”

I clapped my hand across her mouth before whatever crude thing my sweet, sweet child was about to say could roll off her tongue.

“It’s rude to listen to other people’s conversations,” I said.

“Well, your friends ask interesting questions,” came her muffled reply.

Great. That’s what I got for having a nosy child.

I dropped my hold on her when I thought I could trust her not to expand on that train of thought, but as we passed a display of tall pines, she couldn’t seem to help herself.

“They brought up a good point, though. So many men in this city and you haven’t found someone you want more than a third date with lately. That’s not because of me, right?”

I raised a brow. “Of course not. Why would you say that?”

“I mean, having a kid at home is kind of a cockblock.”

Where the hell was the spiced cider, for God’s sake?

“You’re not a… I mean, you’ve never been a…”

“Cockblock? You can say it.”

She wasn’t exactly quiet, and her word choice caught the attention of several people around us. I gave them a tight smile as we walked by, trying my best not to laugh.

“You never were, nor have you ever been, a *cockblock*,” I said, lowering my voice. “I’ve just been a little too busy for a relationship.”

“Oh, right. In a job where you’re the boss and then taking over the top spot at Elysium that you could’ve palmed off to someone else. Got it.”

I eyed her closely. “I didn’t realize you were so anxious for a stepfather.”

“I’m not. I mean, the extra presents I’d get with one couldn’t hurt.” She winked at me—but behind the teasing twinkle, I sensed something was a little off.

Preston’s words from the other night slammed into my brain. He’d said to ask Serena about their relationship. I hadn’t understood what he meant at the time, but maybe they’d broken up? God, I hoped it had nothing to do with me if that was the case.

No. There was no way.

“All right.” I moved off to the side and crossed my arms. “What’s going on with you? Is everything okay?”

“Uh uh. Don’t turn this around on me. I’m fine. Perfect, really.”

“No one’s perfect. Is it school? Classes going okay?”

“Yes.”

“You’re still liking your living situation?”

“Hell yeah. No curfew.”

That left the only other huge part of her life, which was Preston.

Shit, this was the last thing I wanted to talk to her about. But she was my daughter, and if she was hurting, I wanted her to feel like she could always talk to me.

“Is it you and Preston? You two aren’t having problems, are you?”

A strange look crossed her face, and then in a blink it was gone. “No, he’s great. We’re great.”

That didn’t sound convincing at all. “Serena, if something’s wrong or you’re upset about anything—even boy related—you can talk to me about it. You know that, right?”

Her burst of laughter caught me off guard, but I kept my eyes locked with hers, making sure I wasn't missing anything.

"Why are you looking at me like I'm about to have a breakdown? Preston and I are fantastic, I promise. There's nothing to worry about there."

Relief made me relax my shoulders. I'd long since learned I could trust her to tell me the truth, and if she said everything was good, then it had to be.

So what had Preston been talking about? When I'd called him Serena's boyfriend, he'd said, "Am I?" and to talk to her. Stupid me had thought he was talking about their not being together, but what if I'd gotten it wrong? What if he wasn't her boyfriend, but her…fiancé?

Was that it? Things were ratcheting up between them in a different way, and I'd imagined the tension between us as something else?

Keeping my tone as casual as I could muster with my heart racing, I said, "Should I be expecting a talk with him about anything soon? Like maybe announcing something, even though no one asked for my blessing…?"

Serena's eyes widened and her face went slightly pale as she swallowed. "Uh, no. I don't think you have to worry about that."

"I'm not worried. You've chosen a good guy, and he seems to make you happy."

She nodded absently, stroking the needles of the pine beside us. "Yeah, he is. He does."

"But?"

Snapping her attention back to me, she gave a small smile. "But nothing. We're just too young to be thinking about marriage."

"Your mom and I were your age when we had you," I teased.

"And look how well that turned out." She smirked. "Trust me, no engagement, and no babies either. Did you and Preston's parents get together and come up with a plan of attack?"

"No. Why?"

Serena rolled her eyes and turned back to the tree. "You just sound a lot like them. The other night at dinner they were pressing us about weddings and babies too."

"Hang on a second." I took hold of her arm and turned her back to face me. "They want you to have a baby?"

“*An Abernathy man can juggle,*” she said in a low voice that I had to believe was a bad imitation of Preston’s father, the senator. “What Mr. Abernathy fails to realize is that *I’m* the one who’d be juggling school, babies, a household—”

“Wait, wait, wait. Stop right there with the crazy talk. You’re not pregnant, are you?”

“What?” Serena’s eyes grew to the size of saucers. “No. God no.” She let out a deep sigh and shook her head.

“Bug, could you please tell me what’s going on? You’re starting to worry me.”

I could see the way she pushed her shoulders back, like she was steeling herself, and I mentally prepared myself for the worst. Preston had been right. Something was happening that I didn’t know about, and I felt sick that I hadn’t noticed before now.

“Okay,” she said, and then sucked in another deep breath before letting it out slowly. “When I tell you this, I need you to promise not to freak out, okay? Because I’m fine. Preston’s fine. It’s a good thing. It’s just not what you or anyone would expect. And I’m telling you now because I hate keeping secrets from you, and I know you’ll understand. At least, I hope you will.”

I wanted to reassure her that whatever she said next, I *would* understand, but my throat had closed up in anticipation of the worst.

“Preston and I… We’re together. But we’re not really *together*. Not like we’ve let everyone think.”

It felt like the cold wind had smacked me across the face, because all I could do was blink at her.

“We made a pact years ago to help each other out, and it’s worked better than we planned—”

“Hold on,” I said, rubbing the bridge of my nose. “What do you mean, help each other out? With what?”

She arched a brow. “Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten I’d started to make your life a living hell. You threatened to ship me off to an etiquette school if I didn’t get my shit together.”

“And clearly that worked,” I said drolly.

“Hey, at least I’m not out wreaking havoc on the city the way I was in my teens, and a lot of that has to do with Preston. Like you said, he’s a good

guy, and he really helped me turn things around, especially my reputation. Because what could be better than dating a future senator?"

So he was helping her by being a good influence—but what was he getting out of the mix? Did I even want to know?

"So you're not…" I didn't know how to ask what was on the tip of my tongue, but luckily Serena knew where I was going with my train of thought.

Well, kind of.

"Gonna pop out a kid anytime soon? Not with Preston. Unless it's immaculate conception. We're best friends, which is why the arrangement works, nothing more."

"And Preston is…okay with that?" I couldn't imagine any guy his age being fine with a platonic relationship, especially with the crowd he ran with.

"He is," she said carefully. "I'm not his…type."

Just like that, everything I thought I knew was turned on its ass.

"Not his type?" I repeated. She couldn't be implying what I thought, because that would mean I hadn't imagined the electricity between us after all.

"No. Hard to believe, right? I'm pretty fabulous and all, just not enough to turn him straight."

Holy…*fuck*. Even standing out here in the cold, I was burning up. How had I not seen any of this coming? I thought I knew my daughter—hell, I thought I knew Preston—but clearly not. They'd managed to have a huge secret, a fake relationship, right under my nose, and I'd been none the wiser. I supposed I could console myself with the fact that no one else had a clue either, but shit. Some father I was.

"Dad?" Her hand was on my arm, and her big brown eyes filled with concern. "Are you okay?"

Oh, how the tables had turned. I felt like I might pass out. My daughter was telling me she was a beard for Preston, their relationship a front, all because she wanted a clean slate and he was…gay?

"Yeah, I'm just trying to wrap my head around everything." I pulled a little at the corner of my scarf as she hooked an arm through mine. "His parents think you're—"

"I know. But that's half the problem. His parents are…well, his parents. Can you imagine how Mr. Abernathy would react if he found out the truth?"

He'd have a coronary, that was what would happen. "The truth being that Preston—"

"Has his…needs met outside of our relationship, and so do I."

Now I felt like *I* was about to have a coronary.

Here I'd thought we'd spend a nice afternoon together, picking out a Christmas tree, and instead I was learning *way* more about my daughter than I ever expected to know.

"That's something I do not need to know about, thank you very much. But Serena, this is a lot. If the senator finds out—"

"He won't, and Preston will tell him before then. But for now, it's just easier this way."

"Easier for who?"

"Both of us."

"And what's the long-term plan here? To cover for each other the rest of your lives?"

She scrunched her nose up. "No, of course not. Neither of us has met anyone we'd like to pursue more with, and until that happens, why rock the boat?"

So this was what Preston wanted me to know. That there were no romantic feelings between him and Serena, just friendship. What the hell was I supposed to do with that? He was twenty-one and deep in the closet, and I was his girlfriend's father to the rest of the world. Even with this information, there was no way anything more could happen between us. It had already gone too far.

"Dad?" Serena said softly. "Do you want to go get a drink, maybe? Talk a little more about—"

"No. Thank you for telling me, but I think I'm done talking for now." I wasn't sure I could take any more confessions from her today. Not if they were along these lines. As it was, my brain was still trying to catch up.

"Okay. Did you just want to go home, then?"

My eyes caught on a small sign over the grouping of Douglas fir trees, and I shook my head before walking in that direction. "Not yet. We've got a tree to pick out."

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FOUR

preston

“AN ICED AMERICANO for Preston, and an Irish cream cold brew for Travis.”

I didn’t recognize the freshman Travis had solicited to grab our drinks for us from the Astor coffee bar while we lounged in a commandeered spot nearby, but I gave him a quick smile and a thanks before he scurried off.

Travis stretched out along the couch, making himself right at home between classes, then reached into his bag, pulled out a silver flask, and added a bit of whatever was inside to his coffee. When I raised a brow, he shrugged.

“What? You can’t have an Irish coffee without whiskey.”

I shook my head and punched my straw into the lid of my own drink—no spiking necessary. “Who was that?”

“Does it matter?” He took a long swallow of his doctored cold brew before scrolling through his phone. “I swear, this school is such a fucking bore. Even the gossip pages are lame. Not a damn thing happened over the weekend.”

“Are you really basing your time here on posts in the Astor Chronicles?” I didn’t bother glancing up at him as I scribbled down a few more notes from my last class.

“The big story for today, are you ready? ‘Kaia Zaffino denies plastic surgery rumors, insists obvious nose job is stress-related weight loss.’ Are you fucking kidding me? *This* is news? God, we need to fuck shit up.”

Rolling his eyes, Travis dropped his phone onto his lap as I bit back a grin. “Why do I feel like tomorrow’s headline will have something to do

with you?”

“Because you know me. You interested?”

“I thought we were lying low after the Atticus payback?”

“We were, but it’s been weeks.” He picked his phone back up and began to type. “Now where the hell is East…?”

As Travis began to concoct whatever crazy plan he had for more attention—not like we needed it—I cracked my neck from side to side and reached for my drink—only to almost drop it when I caught sight of the man standing by the coffee bar across the room.

Like it always did when I saw him, my heartbeat went wild, speeding up and skipping at the same time. Sweat broke out on the back of my neck, and I had to tighten my grip on my coffee so it didn’t splatter all over the damn floor.

My eyes locked on Archer Carrington and refused to let go.

Why did he have to look so good? The black pinstripe suit he wore, tailored flawlessly to his leanly muscled frame, was entirely out of place at Astor but perfect for his job. Which made me wonder what he was doing here in the middle of the day. It couldn’t have anything to do with Serena—I’d just seen her before her last class started—and he didn’t look upset or panicked about anything.

No, he was giving a charming smile to the barista as he took his coffee, then he took a sip and slid a bill into the tip jar on the counter.

As he turned around, our eyes clashed across the room and he came to a stop. His fingers tightened on the cup in his hand as a smile tugged at the corner of my lips. Any shock I’d felt from seconds ago vanished as my dick stood up like it wanted to say hi too.

He frowned and looked down at his drink, and when he brought his eyes back to mine there was a resoluteness to his gaze. He’d started forward, like he was going to come over, when a hand clapped down on his shoulder.

Professor King, or simply King, as we all referred to him, was a tall, dark, imposing man who seemed to have it out for all of us, but right now he looked anything but hostile as he greeted the object of my attention.

Wait, were those two…friends? No way. King couldn’t possibly have any friends—he was too busy torturing his students to know what fun was. And Archer—*Mr. Carrington*—had more personality in his pinky than King possessed in his entire body.

But they sure were talking to each other like they were more than mere acquaintances.

I scrunched my nose in distaste, because Mr. Carrington shouldn't be wasting his time on someone like King.

"You gonna keep staring, or did you want to go jump his bones?" Travis's voice knocked me out of my stupor, and I looked over to see a moronic grin on his face.

"Sure," I said, swallowing as I set my drink back down. "With King right there?"

"Hey, you never know. King might join in if you ask him nicely."

"Do I look like I have a death wish?"

"No, but obviously Daddy Archer is here for something, and it's not yooou."

"Daddy Archer? I don't think so."

"Okay then, what do you call him in your fuck fantasies? DILF Archer?"

"Ew, that's even worse." My eyes shifted back to the two men over at the coffee bar and trailed down Mr. Carrington's tall frame.

"What about FILTH Carrington?"

My head snapped around until we were practically nose to nose, and a shit-eating grin curved Travis's lips.

"FILTH?"

"Yeah, Father I'd Like to Hit."

Huh. Archer "Filth" Carrington. Now that was something I could get behind…literally.

"You like that one." Travis nodded as we looked back at the men, and I had to admit, I *did* like it a whole lot.

What I *didn't* like was how close King was standing next to Mr. Carrington.

"God, you're not even trying to hide the dreamy eyes over there. You're lucky it's just me sitting here and not one of the other guys, or you'd have some explaining to do."

"Oh gimme a break," I said, ignoring the heat in my face and doing my best to *not* look in Mr. Carrington's direction. "I just thought maybe he'd want to come over here and talk about the information he gave me at his office the other night."

Travis's brows shot up. "You went to his office? At night? Alone?"

“Nothing happened. I’m helping out with—”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m aware of your do-gooder shit, but this? This is juicy. And absolutely fucked, which is more a me thing than a you thing, so let me give you a piece of advice I wouldn’t give anyone else: no.”

I frowned. “No?”

“No.” His voice was firm and not at all what I expected from a guy who wanted to stir shit up for a headline.

“I know, I know. It’s too complicated. That doesn’t mean I can’t look. But thanks for the uncalled-for advice.”

“I get it. Daddy Filth is totally fuckable.”

“No shit. I’ve been trying not to look at him for years.”

Travis snorted and then scooted to the edge of the couch and lowered his voice. “Look, I know you aren’t getting any from *him* right now, so tell you what. You need a release? I’ll take one for the team.”

My eyes went wide. “What?”

“I’m a good friend, and that’s what good friends do. Plus, you think I’m hot.”

“For fuck’s sake, I knew you’d take that the wrong way. I thought good friends just gave advice.”

“And orgasms.” Travis cocked his head, like he was thinking that statement over. “Well, on an as-needed basis or in emergencies. And from the stiff cock in your pants, I’d say this is an emergency.”

I dropped my face into my hands and groaned. “Oh God. Please stop.”

“That’s not what anyone in my bed says when I—”

“Do *not* finish that sentence,” I said, putting my hand up to his mouth. But that was the wrong move, because Travis nipped at my finger and grinned when I pulled my hand away. “I appreciate the offer, but trust me when I say taking you up on it is a terrible idea.”

“Yeah, well, so’s banging him.” Before I could open my mouth, he added, “And you can stop denying you want to—it’s just me.”

“I’m not denying anything. But that doesn’t mean it’s going to happen. He’s hot. Anyone with eyes can see that. Don’t act like you haven’t looked.”

Travis’s lip curled. “I’ve done more than look.”

I whipped my head in his direction and leveled him with a glare. Travis held up a hand in mock surrender.

“In my *dreams*.” He groaned as he turned back to eye the two men across the room. “I mean, who wouldn’t? He’s single, rich, and sexy as fuck. Trust me when I say everyone with a pulse is dreaming about Daddy Filth. Difference is, you’re supposed to be boning his daughter.”

“Lovely.”

“What?” Travis shifted on the couch, facing me. “It’s true. Use your head. How do you think Serena would feel if word got out you wanted to get naked with her dad?”

“Jesus.” I glanced around, making sure no one was within earshot. “Do you have an off button? We’re not going to be getting naked. I’m keeping my damn clothes on.” *Unfortunately.*

“Really? If I could, I’d be naked all the time.”

“Which has me very thankful for the dress code at Astor.”

“You wouldn’t say that if you ever saw me naked.”

A curt cough in front of us had my eyes darting up to—oh, fuck— “Mr. Carrington. Uh, hi.”

Travis snorted as I shot to my feet, and I promised myself I would kill him as soon as I managed to dig myself out of the hole I was currently trying to crawl out of.

“Hello, Preston. Travis. Good to see you both.”

“What brings you by Astor this morning?” I said, hoping with every fiber in my body it was me, but knowing that was unlikely. “Is it Serena?”

“Actually, no. Professor King wanted to see me about the board meeting next month. Nothing too exciting. But I did get a chance to speak to Serena over the weekend. Do you have a minute?”

My heart skipped a beat as I looked into his eyes, and I hoped like hell my face was doing a better job at hiding the way his words made me feel than my racing heart.

So he’d talked to her. Did he know the truth? And if he did, he wanted to talk to me about it…*now?*

I was acutely aware of not only Travis sitting behind me, but also my hard-on he’d just pointed out, and all I could do was hope anyone around didn’t notice.

Think about icebergs…

Think about Antarctica…

Think about polar bears—no, don’t think about bears.

No bears of any kind.

I swallowed hard. “Sure.”

Mr. Carrington turned on his heel and began to walk away, and I shot a look over at Travis, who mouthed, *Try not to get too* filthy.

I ignored the imbecile to follow Mr. Carrington, the man who had every part of my body going haywire. When he disappeared inside one of the study rooms, I ducked in behind him. As the door shut, Mr. Carrington turned and leveled me with an assessing stare. The polite mask from moments ago was gone.

“Lock the door, please, Preston.”

“Lock the—”

“I don’t think you want anyone to overhear the conversation we’re about to have, so, yes, I think it would be best if you lock the door.”

Oh shit. I wasn’t sure if I should be excited or terrified by the seriousness of his voice. But my dick sure knew what *it* was feeling as it throbbed back to life.

The lock clicked into place and seemed to echo off the walls as I found myself standing in the small confines of the room, and for the first time ever I understood the appeal of fucking around during study period.

I could totally fuck around in here.

With him.

“I had a very interesting conversation with Serena this weekend.”

So I’d been right. He knew. He knew we weren’t dating. He knew we weren’t really a couple.

If that was the case, why did he look so…annoyed?

“Oh?”

“*Oh?*” Mr. Carrington put his coffee cup down on the desk behind him and took a step toward me. “Is that all you’ve got to say for yourself?”

I opened my mouth, about to say yes, because that was the proper response, but fuck it. This was my chance. This might be my *only* chance to really speak my mind, my truth, around this man.

“No. I have a whole lot to say. I’m just not sure if you want to hear it.”

“I want to hear the truth.”

“Really?”

“Try me.”

If he wanted to know the truth, I’d give it to him.

My eyes shifted to his mouth. “I’ve wanted to kiss you from the first moment I saw you.”

Mr. Carrington's brows hit his hairline. "Preston, that's not what—"

"You meant?" I asked, deciding it was now or never. "What you wanted to hear? I thought you wanted the truth? And the truth is that night at the charity event was the hottest moment of my life. And it was *just* a kiss."

His lips parted in surprise, and apparently I'd shocked him, because he wasn't able to say a word.

I took a step toward him. "I know it was wrong. But you have to understand that Serena and I aren't together like that—"

"But that's what I don't understand," he said. "This lie that the two of you perpetuated… Explain it to me. Are you gay or bi or confused—"

"I'm not confused." I took another step closer. "I know exactly what I want—I just never thought I had a hope of getting it."

We were close enough now that I could touch him, but Mr. Carrington surprised me by touching me first, putting his hand on my chest. If the move was meant to deter me, it failed. Because that touch was a shock that reverberated through my body, shooting straight to my dick.

"Preston—"

"I love how you say my name." I put my hand over his where it still rested on my chest, holding him there even when he tried to pull back. "Don't you want to hear me say yours?"

The only tell that he was affected was the tic in his jaw before he said, "You need to back up."

"Is that what you really want, or is that what you think you have to say?"

"I'm not doing this." He pulled his hand away and ran it through his hair. As he headed for the door, I thought I heard him mumble, "This was a mistake."

"I thought you wanted to talk," I said when he unlocked the door.

"I think being anywhere alone with you isn't a good idea. Whatever it is you're thinking, whatever scenario you've dreamed up, it's not happening," he said. "No matter what arrangement you and my daughter have, it's clear that the rest of the world has bought into your lies. *I* bought into them. The truth changes nothing."

"Doesn't it?" I trailed my eyes over his pants, which had looked noticeably tighter since we walked in the room. "Then why did you bother to ask?"

He shook his head as he opened the door. "Take care, Preston."

As he left the room, I sighed and ran a hand over my hair.

Fuck. That went well.

But at least I'd have another chance later. It seemed he'd forgotten I'd be stopping by his office tonight…

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FIVE

archer

“I HAD A dreadful feeling I’d find you still here behind a mountain of paperwork.”

I looked up from where I sat at my desk late Monday to see Benoit propped against my office door, a bottle of vermouth in one hand and a small bottle of bitters in the other. His golden-brown hair was only slightly windblown, but the flush in his cheeks and nose and the cashmere scarf thrown artfully around his neck spoke of the cold outside.

I smirked up at my longtime friend as he sauntered in, heading straight for the bar cart.

“Are you here to relieve me, then? Or just taking advantage of my liquor?” I said.

He carefully lifted the top of the crystal whiskey decanter and cocked a brow. “Both, *mon ami*. You’re welcome.”

With a shake of my head, I continued working the monthly figures for my agency, though it was one of the more tedious aspects of owning a business. “Give me five.”

“I’ll give you two.”

Those two minutes passed quicker than expected, and I’d barely finished giving the spreadsheet a final once-over when Benoit set a full tumbler in front of me.

“All right,” I said, logging off the computer and then reaching for the glass. “I yield.”

The Manhattan he’d made was strong and slightly bitter, just the way I liked it—but then, he’d had a couple of decades to perfect it, ever since we

were roommates during our Astor days.

As the alcohol made its way through my veins, I sighed and leaned back in my leather chair, kicking my feet up on the desk. “Have I mentioned I’m glad you’re back? London doesn’t deserve you.” I held up my glass. “Or these.”

A hint of a smile lifted Benoit’s lips. “If I’d known you missed me that much, I would’ve come back sooner.”

“Liar.”

“Well, I would’ve thought about it.” He winked at me over his glass, and I couldn’t help but grin at my old friend.

Well, *old* wasn’t really the word to describe either of us. I’d only recently turned forty-two, and the number still felt foreign to me. In some ways I understood it. I had a daughter in college; I owned my own company. I was accomplished. Settled, in most ways. But I couldn’t reconcile it with the fact that I still *felt* like I was in my early thirties. Especially when I was around a certain college kid.

Hell, Benoit, with his unlined skin and youthful energy, looked closer to Preston’s age. It was only his wealth of jet-setting experience that gave him away.

He unwound his scarf and draped it over the chair beside him, then crossed his legs. “Ugh. I’d almost forgotten how much colder the winters are here.”

“All the better to find a few hot bodies to share them with—isn’t that what you always said?”

“You know me too well. Why do you think I’m pre-gaming here?” A satisfied smile curved his lips. “Any prospects I should know about?”

I choked a little on my drink. “For me?”

Benoit blinked slowly. “Yes, for you. Or have you gone celibate in my absence?”

I almost let out a snort at that. “Hardly.”

“Then is there anyone of interest I should avoid an entanglement with?”

I set my glass aside and crossed my hands over my stomach. “You know what I find entertaining about you?”

“Only everything?”

“Your so-called altruism.”

Benoit’s mouth fell open. “*So-called*?”

I twisted my glass in circles on my desk. “Mhmm.”

“Are you saying I’m asking about your sex life out of nosy interest and not because I want to steer clear of anyone you have your eye on?”

I nodded. “Nailed it.”

The look of pretend shock on Benoit’s face settled into a wide grin, and he shrugged. “Fine. You caught me. I’m a gossipy whore who wants all the dirty details.”

A laugh boomed out of me as I lifted my drink again. Benoit would salivate if he knew the trouble I’d almost gotten myself into today when I made the mistake of locking myself in a room with Preston. That had been a close call.

“There’s no one of particular interest, so the city is your oyster.”

“Hmm.” He eyed me a little too curiously. “You *are* getting laid, right? I don’t need to have an intervention—”

“No, no,” I said, shaking my head. As if I’d last long without an outlet for all the stress and responsibilities on my shoulders. No, I had no problem finding a willing body for a night, but suddenly my focus was a little too singular, and that was something that couldn’t continue. “Don’t worry, I’m satisfied,” I assured Benoit.

“I mean with more than just your hand, *friend*.”

I was about to tell him who and where I’d been fully satisfied by recently—more to shut him up than to partake in his gossipy ways—when I was saved by the bell.

Sasha’s line lit up, and I quickly took the opportunity to avoid Benoit’s all-too-knowing stare.

“Yes, Sasha? What is it?”

“Preston Abernathy is here to see you. Would you like me to have him wait, or should I send him in?”

Mother*fucker*. What the hell was Preston doing here? I’d made it clear earlier that I had no intention of continuing his line of conversation.

“I’m busy,” I replied.

There was a pause, like Sasha was relaying the message, and then she was back. “He says it’ll just take a minute. Something to do with the Winter Ball.”

Winter Ball, my ass.

But… Benoit was here. He would be a buffer to keep Preston from saying or doing anything that would lead the both of us somewhere we shouldn’t go.

I swallowed a sigh. “You can send him in.”

“Very good.”

Benoit smiled as I hit the button to end the intercom. “Who’s Preston?”

“No one.”

There was a knock on the door, and I took my feet off the desk and sat up.

“Come in,” I called out.

“Hi.” A knowing smile just this side of flirtatious curved Preston’s lips as he stepped into my office and shut the door behind him. But when he spotted Benoit sitting in the chair opposite me, he came to a standstill and his smile fell. “Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to interrupt. I didn’t realize you were in the middle of a meeting.”

Benoit swiveled in his seat to see who’d joined us, and he gave Preston a long once-over. “Trust me, *mon cher*, with a face like that, you *never* have to worry about interrupting.”

“Knock it off, Benoit.” I shook my head and gestured for Preston to come in. My friend turned back to me, raised his perfectly sculpted brows, and mouthed, *Is* he *fully satisfying you?*

Of course he’d go there. Preston was a looker, and all that confidence had caught Benoit’s attention. I gave my friend a curt shake of my head.

“Benoit, this is Preston. Serena’s *boyfriend*.” I added the extra emphasis for everyone’s benefit, and I couldn’t help but notice the flash of annoyance in Preston’s eyes. But I could see the way Benoit was eyeing Senator Abernathy’s son, and with his fresh-faced good looks and easygoing charm, Preston would be the exact kind of distraction Benoit would be looking for in the city.

A disappointed expression crossed Benoit’s face before he quickly plastered on a polite smile. “Oh, well, that’s a shame. But lucky for Serena.”

“It is,” I said, and eyed Preston pointedly. “Preston is great for Serena, and they’re wonderful together. I couldn’t be happier for them.”

With Benoit watching, Preston was back to playing the part of the perfect son and boyfriend. He bit his lip before nodding and giving my friend a tight smile.

“How do you know Mr. Carrington?”

Benoit ran his finger along the lip of his glass in slow circles and smirked. “How do I *not* know him?”

Oh Jesus.

Preston looked between the two of us, clearly taken aback. “Are you two…together?”

It wouldn’t be the worst thing for him to think I was taken, but lying to him after *his* truths had come out didn’t feel right.

“Honey, no.” Benoit let out a lyrical laugh. “I can’t be tied down, not even by someone as handsome as my old friend here. You know what they say, keep a man in every port.”

I shook my head. “Is that what they say?”

Benoit lifted a shoulder. “Well, it’s what *I* say.”

Fighting the urge to roll my eyes, I looked back to Preston. “What brings you by?”

Preston seemed to gather himself as he opened the leather flap of his messenger bag and pulled out a plastic binder.

“I told you when I stopped by Friday that I’d work on those figures you asked me for.” He slipped the folder across the desk and flipped it open to the first page. “I got a few different quotes for the interior lighting if you still want to go with the winter’s night theme.”

“Winter’s night?”

I glanced at Benoit. “Yes. I thought the blues and silvers under twinkling lights would make for a festive and romantic setting at the Elysium this year. Instead of the same old traditional red, green, and gold.”

“Ah, yes,” Benoit said. “What better time to fall in love than during the holidays. Don’t you think, Preston?”

Tension radiated off Preston, but he held his tongue. “I suppose so. I’m just doing what Mr. Carrington tells me.”

“Well, aren’t you a good boy.”

I aimed a *shut the fuck up* glare in my friend’s direction.

“I can be,” Preston said, and I didn’t miss the double meaning in his words.

Benoit took a sip of his drink then looked over the rim of the glass at me. “I’m sure.”

Desperately needing to stop this line of conversation, I reached for the folder and flicked through it. I wasn’t surprised at all to find pages of quotes for everything I’d listed, all expertly organized and including his thoughts on each. “As always, you’ve done an impressive job. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Instead of leaving, Preston leaned over the desk. I stopped breathing at the close proximity, his face only a foot away, his eyes piercing mine.

I could sense the way he reached between us, pointing something out in the binder, but he didn’t break our connection, and I was too focused on what he was doing to force myself to look away in case he tried something—and in case I let him.

“Just so you know…” His voice had a purring quality to it, and it stroked between my thighs. “I highlighted the ones I thought you’d like best.”

A muffled sound—a cough, maybe—came from the other man still sitting in the room, and even with the awareness that we weren’t alone, I couldn’t bring myself to pull away from whatever hold Preston had on me.

Maybe I shouldn’t have let him come in after all. I should’ve stuck to my initial plan of having him report to Sasha, to limit our interaction, *especially* after what happened earlier today.

“Archer.”

When I saw the pointed way Benoit was staring at me and shaking his head, it was enough to snap me out of whatever headspace I’d gotten caught in.

I cleared my throat and closed the binder. “Thank you, Preston, this is going to be very helpful. I’ll go over the estimates.”

Preston straightened, but I didn’t dare look at him as he said, “Great. Let me know if you need *anything* else.”

“Archer, would you like Preston to join us for a drink?” Benoit offered, ever the instigator.

Preston slowly smiled when I made the mistake of looking up, and when his eyes caught and held mine a second longer than usual, I found myself reaching for, and adjusting, my tie. Damn Benoit for putting me on the spot. But there was no way I was going to be in the same room with Preston and a bottle of whiskey.

“As much as I’d love to, I’ve got to get going,” Preston said. “I’m meeting Serena for dinner, and I don’t want to be late.”

Jumping on the opportunity to get him gone, I nodded. “Of course. You should go.”

A strange, unfamiliar tension filled the air between us as Preston looked to Benoit. “It was nice to meet you.”

“The pleasure was all mine, *mon cher.*”

Preston looked back at me, his eyes almost twinkling as he grinned. “Have a good night, Mr. Carrington.”

As he gave a final wave, Benoit and I watched him go. The second the door shut behind him, Benoit turned on me, his mouth hanging open.

“You dirty, dirty dog.”

“Excuse me?”

“Don’t try to act innocent with me, *Mr. Carrington*.” Benoit uncrossed his long legs and got to his feet. “I saw that moment between you two.”

“There was no moment between us. He’s my daughter’s boyfriend.”

“If I hadn’t been here, that boy would’ve crawled on top of that desk and done *anything* you needed.”

“You’re imagining things.”

“No, I’m not. But what I want to know is what in the incestuous hell have you and Serena gotten yourselves into?”

“Not a thing.”

“Yet. You can’t tell me you’re not thinking about it, though. I can taste the sexual tension in here.”

“What? You’re delusional.”

“Uh, no. You’re the delusional one. Did you not see the way he was looking at you? Not to mention, who brings by a folder with information these days? Has the kid not heard of email? He wanted to see you, *Mr. Carrington.*”

Benoit batted his lashes, making me laugh. “You’re crazy. And stop calling me that.”

“Why, *Mr. Carrington*? Does it make you horny?”

“Not fucking likely. It sounds like you’re talking about my father.”

“Well, we’re definitely talking about *someone’s* father. How long have you wanted to rip the clothes off that pretty young thing?”

His words hit the mark, and I clenched my molars. “I don’t want to rip them off.”

“No? Not even with your bare hands? What about your teeth? Popping button by button—”

“Aaand I think you’ve outstayed your welcome,” I said, swallowing the last of my Manhattan.

Benoit pouted. “But I haven’t finished my drink yet, *Mr.*—”

“Fine, you can stay if you stop calling me that.”

“Okay.” Benoit paused, and just when I thought he’d moved on, he asked, “Do you prefer Daddy?”

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SIX

preston

Are you still at the office?

I’m finished with dinner and could use a drink…

I CHECKED MY messages for the umpteenth time, and when I saw Mr. Carrington still hadn’t responded to the ones I’d sent a couple hours ago, I considered calling him. But it was too loud at the club my friends had chosen to make an appearance at tonight. At least, that was the excuse I was going with, because the truth was, I didn’t want even more radio silence from him.

Today hadn’t gone anything like I’d expected. Mr. Carrington showing up at Astor, demanding the truth, and then shutting me down when it wasn’t what he wanted to hear.

Well, I didn’t think that was necessarily true. He wouldn’t *let* himself hear. But dropping by his office tonight to convince him otherwise had only gotten me cockblocked by his friend Benoit. But there *had* been a moment between us, one I knew he’d felt too, and if I could just get him alone again, I could show him.

“If you’re gonna be on your phone with Serena all night, you should’ve just invited her,” West said, knocking into my shoulder as he sidled up beside me at the bar.

I quickly shoved my phone into my pants pocket. “Can’t interrupt girls’ night.”

“Girls’ night?” West held up two fingers for the bartender, who nodded. “What does that entail? Manicures? Strippers?”

“You know what, I’ve never asked.”

“You’re not curious what she gets up to when you’re not around?”

Not in the slightest. If anything funny or interesting ever happened, Serena would end up telling me anyway, but what she did wasn’t any of my business.

The same as what I did wasn’t anything she needed to know right now.

I shook my head as two bourbon sours appeared in front of West. “Some of us don’t need to stalk our significant others.”

West scoffed. “I don’t stalk—”

“What was that?” His boyfriend, JT, dropped his chin on West’s shoulder from behind. “Because I know you weren’t about to say you didn’t stalk me when Preston was there for all of it.”

“Finding out helpful information isn’t the same thing, Golden Boy.”

“Uh huh, you keep telling yourself that.” JT grabbed his drink and took a sip. “I think it’s nice that Serena has her nights out. She has to get sick of hanging out with us all the time.”

West glanced back at his boyfriend. “You trying to say something?”

“No, but sometimes it’s nice to have friends outside your immediate group.”

“Like Caleb?”

“Well, yeah, he was the first friend I made at Astor, and he still won’t say why he doesn’t want to hang with this group. So I have to make time outside of you.”

I glanced past the two lovebirds to the dance floor, where Travis was bumping and grinding with tonight’s latest conquest, and tried to come up with a way to excuse myself. The last thing I wanted to do was get caught up in a discussion about someone else’s business, and Caleb’s reason for not hanging out with our group was the one person who held all of my secrets—Travis.

JT kissed West’s cheek. “But don’t worry. You’re still my top priority.”

“I better be.”

I’d grabbed my drink, about to head back to where the rest of our crowd was milling, when my phone vibrated in my pocket.

I stepped away from prying eyes, and when I pulled my phone out and saw a notification from FILTH on my screen, my heart began to thump wildly.

Mr. Carrington had texted back.

I wasn’t sure why I was so surprised, but seeing his nickname on my screen made me glance around to make sure no one else was looking. Not that anyone would know who it was, which was the exact reason I’d used it. Well, that, and because it fit him to a tee.

Archer “Filth” Carrington…

I ducked off to the side of the club and into a shadowed corner, where I opened the message.

FILTH:

I’m at home, it’s late. Good night.

Not the kind of response I’d been hoping for, but it was better than nothing. It was an open line of communication, and I had enough of a buzz happening that I was going to take it.

It is a good night. It could be better, though. What are you doing?

I grinned as I hit send. The message was generic enough that he couldn’t accuse me of overstepping. I was just being polite. Cordial.

The three dots that popped up made my pulse race. He was writing back. He hadn’t turned the phone off, which he’d do if he didn’t want to talk, right?

FILTH:

Reading through the quotes you dropped off at the office.

That was it. That was all he wrote. No question. No lead-in to a more in-depth conversation. Just a succinct response designed to make me lose interest.

It was a brilliant plan, really, and probably would’ve worked—if the very mention of him in his office didn’t bring to mind the sexy picture he made sitting behind his desk. The same desk I’d imagined him bending me over.

My cock jerked as I remembered the way he'd eyed my mouth this afternoon like he wanted another taste, and I had a feeling that if his friend hadn't been there, he would've taken it.

I could come over and go through them with you if you like.

FILTH:

No.

The response was immediate, and I knew why. He didn't trust himself around me. I'd seen it in his eyes today in the study room. I took another sip of my drink, and the alcohol hummed through me, making me bold.

Are you sure? I did volunteer to help.

FILTH:

And it was a mistake for me to accept that help.

A misguided sense of confidence ran through me. I was getting to him, breaking through his no-nonsense texts—but then another message came through, then another, and another.

FILTH:

It was a mistake to come see you today.

And a mistake that night of the charity event.

You need to stop texting. This, all of it, you, was a mistake that we both need to move on from. I'm turning off my phone now.

I stared at the rapid-fire responses and read them one after another, over and over again until they blurred into one. I zeroed in on the word *mistake* that he'd written four times.

Four. Fucking. Times.

I was a mistake?

Our kiss was a mistake?

Fuck. That.

The irritation flowing through me had me looking around for the one person I could count on to make me feel better, to forget about how stupid I'd been to think there was any kind of chance with Archer.

Mr. Carrington. Whatever.

As expected, East was surrounded by a group of admirers hanging on his every word, but it only took me tugging on his arm and saying, "I need you," to get his full attention.

Of all of the Park Avenue Princes, East was the most judgmental by far, and his upper lip curled as those assessing eyes raked over me.

"*You* need *me*? I agree, but in what way in particular?"

"I don't want to remember anything from tonight when I wake up tomorrow."

His arched brow rose even higher. "Drinks or something a little stronger?"

That was why I went to East. He didn't ask why, trusting that if someone had fucked with us, we'd tell him so revenge could be exacted. Anything else and he'd make it happen.

"Drinks," I said.

"A shit-faced Preston. This'll be fun."

He steered me toward the main bar, and it never ceased to amaze the way people scattered to get out of our way. East leaned over the bar, whispering something in the bartender's ear, and a few moments later, several shot glasses were set out in front of us.

"Cheers to me. Cheers to you. Cheers to a drink that lets you forget all that you do!" He clinked his glass against mine. "Get messy, my friend. I promise you'll remember nothing tomorrow."

I didn't bother asking what he'd ordered, just downed the shots one at a time, and to his credit, East didn't let me drink alone. That was what friends were for, right?

"Whoa, what the hell is going on here without me?" Travis moved in between us, stealing the last of East's shots and throwing it back. His face puckered and he slammed the empty glass on the bar. "Holy shit, you drank six of those?"

"Mind your business," East said, pushing Travis away before reaching for the large glass with two straws that had appeared between us. Whatever

he’d ordered was layered, dark to light, and again, I didn’t much care what it was.

Calling me a mistake… The texts Mr. Carrington sent still irked, and I didn’t want to think about them.

I lowered my mouth to the straw as East did the same, our foreheads almost touching.

“Go,” he said, and I began to suck down the drink in large pulls, ignoring the fact that the rest of our friends had gathered around us and were egging us on.

All but Travis, who leaned in by my ear and said in a low voice, “You good, man?”

East lifted his head, shooting Travis a glare. “Fuck off before you kill his buzz.”

I couldn’t see Travis’s reaction, since I was still sucking down the alcohol—and starting to feel a nice buzz—but he’d backed away.

“Is that Preston doing a Mind Eraser?” Gavin said, surprise in his voice.

Mind Eraser. That was perfect for what I was trying to do. Was there anything called a Text Eraser? ’Cause I wanted one of those too.

Fucking mistake, *my ass.*

East and I finished off the drink, and his lips quirked as I took in a deep breath. Already my head felt a little lighter. It was a welcome feeling, one I wanted more of.

“What’s next?” I shouted over the DJ talking at the start of the next song.

“Now we dance.” When East waggled his brows, I shook my head.

“You know I don’t like to dance.”

“I think you’ll find that, after all those drinks, you do.”

He curled his fingers into the waist of my pants and walked backward, pulling me into the center of the VIP’s dance floor, and I was too weightless to protest. At some point he took off his jacket, leaving him in a fitted black vest over a white collared shirt, and I understood why. The air was thick and hot and stifling, and wearing both a long-sleeved shirt and a sweater over it was making my skin boil.

I pulled the sweater up over my head and tossed it in Travis’s direction, ignoring the way he stared at me like I’d lost my mind.

I hadn’t lost it. At least, not yet.

This, all of it, you, *was a mistake…*

Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath in through my nose and tried to forget. That would be easy enough with the music up so loud it should be able to drown out my thoughts.

A pair of hands landed on either side of my hips, and my eyes shot open to see East grinning in that immoral way he had about him.

"I know you're straight, but for fuck's sake, you've got to learn how to move your hips," he shouted.

It was on the tip of my tongue to refute his words, to spill my secrets, but I was having difficulty forming a coherent sentence. Instead, I focused on the music and letting my body move along with it, barely noticing when East dropped his hands from me.

I was in my own world, the alcohol loosening my usual inhibitions and allowing me to just *feel*. The beat throbbed through me as I moved in amongst the throng of people all bumping and grinding. As I turned to see who had moved in behind me, I spotted Travis.

He grabbed my arm and tugged me in close. "What's going on with you?" he shouted by my ear.

I jerked my arm free, shaking my head. "Nothing."

"Bullshit." He reached for me again, and when I went to bat his hand away, he took hold of it and began to lead me off the dance floor.

Fucking hell. The one night I wanted Travis to be Travis, and instead he was acting like my goddamn mother.

"What are you doing?" I tore my hand from his the second we were clear of the crowd, and Travis rounded on me so fast I stumbled back a step.

"Saving your ass."

I screwed my nose up and scoffed. "From what? Bad dancing?"

"From your fucking self, is what." Travis's jaw bunched as he looked me over. "When was the last time you ever got drunk with the guys?"

"Um, never."

"Exactly. And why is that?"

Because I had too many secrets that might come spilling out if my tongue got loose. One extra, if I counted my recent dumbass "mistake." But I wasn't counting that, so fuck him.

"I'm not going to say anything stuuupid," I slurred, my tongue feeling more numb than loose.

“You don’t have to *say* anything to have people talking. East is already trying to work out if you were body-snatched tonight, and if you think for one second he’s going to let this go tomorrow, you got another thing coming.”

I glanced over my shoulder to see East dancing with a tall blond wearing leather pants and not much else. But his eyes were locked on us—*shit*.

“Exactly. I don’t know what set you off, but I have a feeling it starts with Daddy and ends with Filth—”

“Shut the hell up.”

“Mhmm. I think maybe you should call it a night and go sleep it off.”

“I don’t want—” My words were cut off as Travis grabbed my elbow and towed me toward the doors. I followed after him, my legs like Jell-O, and I had to admit I was glad for his hand. As we weaved through the people lingering around the front entrance, I had a feeling I would’ve face-planted if I’d been making a go of it on my own.

Jesus. What had been in those drinks?

As our feet hit the pavement, Scotty—our driver—pulled up in the Sprinter van our group used to get around the city, and the next thing I knew, Travis was putting me in the car.

I slumped down into the seat and heard him tell Scotty, “Take him home, would you?”

As the door slid shut, I glared out the window at the cars whizzing by. Horns honked as taxis, buses, and cars navigated the busy city streets, but as Scotty pulled away from the curb, all I could hear echoing in my head was—

You were a mistake…

A mistake…

A mistake…

A mistake, was I?

Well, if that was what the patronizing Mr. Archer Carrington thought, then he could say it to my damn face.

I leaned forward and tapped Scotty on the arm. “Change of plans. Take me to the Carringtons’ place.”

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SEVEN

archer

THE SOUND OF my doorbell being rung incessantly woke me out of a dead sleep.

I shot up in the bed, even as my eyes struggled to open, and reached over to switch on the lamp. A quick glance at the time on my phone showed that it was after one a.m., which meant I hadn't been asleep for too long.

I couldn't help the panic that filled my chest as the doorbell kept ringing, wondering who it could be at such a late hour and automatically thinking it was an emergency. There were no missed calls or texts on my phone, but that didn't mean much, and I quickly threw on the pajama pants by my bed and practically ran downstairs.

Please let everything be okay, please let Serena be fine—

After turning off the alarm, I threw open the door…and my heart seized.

It wasn't a police officer standing there, or even a firefighter. It was someone even more unwelcome, if that was possible.

Preston was leaning against the exterior wood paneling of my porch, his finger on the doorbell, continuing to hit the button until he finally looked up to realize I was standing there in front of him. His hand dropped to his side and his glazed eyes widened before doing a long, lazy once-over of my body.

"Wow. You're shirtless," he said, words slurring as he pushed off the wall, but the move caused him to stumble precariously close to the edge of the stairs, and I jerked forward, grabbing him by the arms before he could fall.

“Preston, what the fuck?” The panic I’d felt before opening the door turned into shock once I saw who was standing there, but now? Having a drunken visitor in the middle of the night was wild enough, but Preston?

Unacceptable.

“Have you lost your mind?” I snapped, righting him so he could stand on his own. The moment he stopped swaying, I took a step back, because I didn’t need to be touching him. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m no one’s mistake.” There was a wild look in his eyes as they narrowed on me, and he took a step forward, like he fully expected to come inside.

No. Hell no. No way was it a good idea to let him in. A sober Preston was dangerous enough, but being drunk and coming here in the middle of the night? It was reckless in a way he wasn’t. At least not usually, which made me wonder what the hell he was doing.

I looked up and down the quiet street, no cars or taxis around. Did he walk all the way here? Shit, I hoped not, since he could barely seem to stand up straight.

“Preston, you can’t be here. You need to go home.”

“I want to come in.”

Of course he wanted what he couldn’t have. “That’s not a good idea.”

“Because I’m a *mistake*?” He practically spat the word, and suddenly it hit me why he kept saying it.

The texts.

Motherfucker. Instead of warning him away, I’d brought him right to my goddamn door. Looking disheveled in a way I’d never seen him, but that didn’t make him any less appealing. Hell, it probably suited him even better. He’d obviously run his fingers through his hair, ruffling the brown strands that were always so perfectly in place.

Now that I was looking at him, I saw that his sweater was tucked into the back of his pants, leaving him in an unbuttoned collared shirt with the sleeves messily rolled up his forearms. He had to be freezing.

“You need to go home,” I said again, reaching for my phone in my pocket only to realize I’d left it upstairs. *Shit*. “How’d you get here? Your driver?”

Preston only gave a hint of a smile and licked his lips, and I took that as an affirmative.

I sighed. “Let’s call him. Give me your phone.”

“I’m not leaving,” he said stubbornly.

“You’re not fucking staying.”

A wicked glint sparked his eyes as he leaned forward and whispered, “How about staying and fucking, then?”

If I wasn’t actually standing there, I wouldn’t have believed the words that had just come out of his mouth. But with as close as he was, his words quickly conjured up images that had no business being in my head.

I took a step back, realizing that any kind of conversation was futile. Preston had come here with a mission, and I had a feeling that mission was me. The best thing I could do was get the hell away from him.

“Look, I’m going to go grab my phone. You put your sweater on and—”

“No.” Preston walked forward, and I had two choices: come toe to toe with the guy or back the hell up. The problem was, the only place I could back up into was my house—which was the last place I needed him to be.

“That wasn’t a yes or no question, Preston. It was an—”

“Order?” A relaxed smirk curved his lips as his toes bumped into mine. “Mmm. I can follow those. I told you earlier that I can be a good boy. Let me inside. I’ll show you.”

Jesus. What had I ever done to deserve this? Seriously?

Was I bad person? I didn’t think so. A bad father? Not according to Serena, who seemed as levelheaded as any young woman could be these days.

So that left what? A test? Was I somehow being tested right now?

I hadn’t been lying when I told Benoit I’d been making sure to date and keep myself satisfied, but I was only human, and if Preston had been anyone other than who he was, I would have had him in my house and naked quicker than I could say—

“Enough, Preston.” I put a hand to his chest, and just like that afternoon in the study room, he looked down at it and covered it with his.

“That’s the problem,” he said in a tone I’d never heard from him before. It was low, taunting, and just this side of forbidden. “I haven’t had nearly enough of you, and I don’t think you’ve had enough of me.”

He dragged my hand down his body, under the bright light over my front door, and curled my hand around his thick length. *Holy shit.*

“If you’re going to call me a mistake, then I’m going to make sure you know what a really fucking *big* one I am.”

He let go of my hand and left me standing on my front stoop utterly gobsmacked, as he stepped around me and into my house.

My. House.

I spun around in time to see him pull his sweater from the back of his pants and toss it over the banister of the stairs inside the main foyer, then head into the sitting room. As he disappeared out of sight, I shook my head and marched inside, shutting the door behind me.

This was bad. So fucking bad.

Not only was Preston now in my house, but I'd just been forced to lock the drunk little shit in here with me. At least, that's what I was telling myself. It was late, and cold outside, I wasn't about to leave the door wide open.

I looked up the stairs, wondering how much trouble he could possibly get in if I were to run up and grab my phone. But then the very real possibility that he might follow popped in my head, and I nixed that idea.

The last thing I needed was Preston Abernathy near my bedroom.

I took in a deep breath and counted back from ten. I could do this. I was the adult here—technically he was too, but I wasn't about to let myself think like that—and I could deal with a drunk kid.

My palm tingled, reminding me that that was no *kid* who'd just waltzed into my house like he owned it, but a grown-ass man. A man I needed to toss into a cab and send home right fucking now.

I looked at the coat rack just inside the door and wondered how ridiculous it would be to throw one of them on to cover myself.

Okay, this was just stupid. Was I really standing in my foyer afraid to go and speak to Preston? *Preston?* The straitlaced guy who'd sat at my dinner table dozens of times and been nothing if not polite? The same guy who was on the road to be some sort of political force in the future?

It was time to put an end to this.

I grabbed his sweater off the banister and stormed into my sitting area, but what I saw when I got there had my feet grinding to a dead stop.

Preston Abernathy, the studious, quiet, polite young man that I knew, was nowhere to be found. In his place was a sexy, disheveled temptation lounged back in one of my leather chairs. His white shirt was unbuttoned at the throat and pulled from his pants, and his legs sprawled apart as he massaged a palm over his "big" mistake.

Fuck.

I swallowed hard. I couldn’t afford to encourage this, no matter how much my traitorous dick wanted to show him otherwise.

As casually as I could manage, I moved the hand holding his sweater in front of me and narrowed my eyes on Preston.

“For fuck’s sake,” I growled, shaking my head as he continued watching me and touching himself. “Stop.”

“Stop what? This?” He tried for an innocence I now knew he never really possessed, and his smile turned feral. Arching his head back, he let out a sexy moan and curled his fingers around his thick length. “If you want me to stop, you’ll have to make me.”

“Preston—”

“God I love the way you say my name.” His eyes opened and locked on mine. He stopped moving his hand, and for a brief moment I thought he was going to give me some relief and realize this wasn’t a good idea.

But then he began to unbutton his shirt. One by one, he flicked each button free, bringing his smooth skin into view. Dark hair lightly dusted his chest, trailing down his fit body, and fuck, I couldn’t tear my eyes away. I needed to. I needed him to leave, because I couldn’t trust either of us to make a good decision.

No, it had to be me. He’d been drinking. He didn’t know what he was doing.

“You want me,” he said, his voice heated but still slightly slurred around the edges. “I won’t tell anyone.”

“You’re drunk.”

A throaty laugh rumbled out of him. “No shit. You called me a mistake. Why would you do that?” As his shirt fell open at the sides, he reached for the button of his pants, and before I could tell him to stop, he had it undone.

Whatever control I thought I had of this situation was clearly a figment of my imagination. I cursed, gripping the back of my neck and turning away from the man trying to lure me into his snare.

“I meant it,” I said, and even to my ears the words didn’t sound at all convincing. “This can’t happen—”

“You’ve said all that.” The sound of his zipper being undone had my jaw clenching and my dick hardening. “But no one has to know.”

Keeping my back to him was the smart thing. Leaving the room would be even smarter.

Another moan from Preston's lips made my heart beat faster, and my hands were clenched so tight around his sweater that I thought I'd rip the fabric.

"Come touch me."

"I already told you I'm not touching you again."

"You're missing out." I could hear him shifting in the chair behind me, and I quickly turned around, thinking he was getting up.

But he remained right where he was, only now his pants and boxer briefs were down his thighs, his bare ass on the leather seat, and his hand teasing the head of his dick.

His gorgeous, perfect, long, flushed dick.

My lips parted at the sight, and somehow I'd let go of the hold I had on his sweater. Preston's eyes dropped to my obvious erection, and he bit down on his lower lip, like he was more than satisfied at my reaction.

"You're so fuckin' hot," he said, running his fist down his length. "Your body… That tattoo. I didn't even know you had one."

It was irrational, the wave of pride I felt at having such a gorgeous young thing admiring…*me*. I kept in shape the best I could, but I wasn't a twenty-something anymore. To look at Preston's lustful expression, though, you would've thought I was the sexiest motherfucker on the planet.

Why did he have to look at me like that?

"Watch me," Preston said. "If you won't touch me, then watch me."

I shouldn't. But even when I told him again to stop, it was halfhearted. Because the truth was, I didn't *want* him to stop, and that was a dangerous admission I couldn't say out loud.

Preston spat into his palm and then reached for himself again, stroking his cock from base to tip, and I decided—*fuck it.*

If there was no way to stop this train wreck, I might as well take a seat, because it was going to happen whether I wanted it to or not.

I moved to the leather chair opposite to him, and the expression on Preston's face turned downright sinful. His eyes darkened and his cheeks heated as he slowly dragged his tongue along his lower lip.

This was so wrong on every level, I knew that. But when his hips lifted off the seat and the plump head of his dick slid through his tight fist, all I could think about was licking the pre-cum that glistened at the tip.

I dragged my teeth along my lower lip as though I could taste him there, and a low groan met my ears.

“Archer…” My name sounded like a dirty word as it rolled off his tongue, and I reached down to adjust my wayward cock. “Oh, I’m sorry. I’m supposed to call you…*Mr.* Carrington.”

Goddamn. How did that sound even dirtier than my first name?

This was crazy. But then again, so was the fact that I was eye-fucking my daughter’s boyfriend—no, *fake* boyfriend—to orgasm right now.

And there was no mistaking that *that* was what I was doing, as Preston locked eyes with me and that hand of his began to move even faster.

“Tell me you don’t think about that night? That kiss? That *it* wasn’t a mistake, but denying me was.”

My nostrils flared as I all but strangled my dick in an effort to both punish and stop it from making a fool of me.

“Tell me you don’t want to come over here and taste how much I fucking want you.”

“Preston—”

“Yes… Say that again.”

I was in way over my head at this stage, and nothing I did or said was going to stop this now—and really, did I want it to?

“Preston…”

“Louder.”

“Preston.”

“Yes…”

He closed his eyes and let his head fall back against the chair as he began to fuck his fist in earnest. The sight of him unraveling in front of me was like some kind of magnetic pull. It had to be. That was the only reason why I was on my feet, moving across the room and stopping in front of him.

“Preston.”

His eyes snapped open as I reached down and covered his hand with mine.

“Oh *fuck*…” Preston’s breath caught as he sucked in a deep swallow, his eyes glazing over as I tightened my fist around his.

“You can follow orders, can you?” Damn, I was in so much trouble. “Then show me. Be a good boy, and come.”

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EIGHT

preston

THE THROBBING IN my head was what woke me up. It felt like it was getting smashed in a door repeatedly, and all I could do was lie there and take it.

Ugh, even my eyes hurt, which was why I couldn't seem to pry them open.

And then there was the unease in my stomach that I didn't recognize, like a turbulent storm had rolled through, leaving my insides swaying precariously.

God, this had to be the hangover from hell. I remembered doing shots with East, though how he'd convinced me to join in was beyond me—

Wait.

Shit.

I'd been the one to ask him, hadn't I? Because I'd been pissed off at Mr. Carrington.

My eyes flew open, and that was a mistake. The sun was too bright, sending a fresh wave of pain through my skull.

Was this all from alcohol, or had East given me something even stronger? Because damn, this was intense. It didn't help that I'd apparently fallen asleep in a chair, judging by the stiffness in my neck and back. I forced my eyes open again.

I was in a chair…that wasn't mine.

Squinting, I shielded my face from the sun streaming in windows—also not mine—and realized in a heartbeat where I was.

I was at the Carringtons' place. *Mr.* Carrington's place. Sprawled out in a leather chair with a blanket over me. How and why was I here?

The house was quiet as I pushed the blanket aside, but when my bare chest and undone pants came into view, I sucked in a breath. Holy shit, what happened to have me half-naked and alone in a chair at Mr. Carrington's house?

"That was quite the performance you put on last night."

I looked up to see Mr. Carrington staring at me, his head slightly cocked, his hands in the pockets of his pants.

He was already dressed like he was heading to the office, in a navy suit and tie that cost more than most people's rent in the city, or at least from what I'd heard.

Goddamn he was gorgeous, and that wasn't the alcohol lingering in my system doing the talking. Mr. Carrington wore a suit better than anyone I'd ever seen, and even as hot as that was, I couldn't help but wonder what was underneath those layers.

His gaze roved over me and a faint smirk appeared as he took in the exposed skin my blanket had uncovered. Belatedly I realized he had a full view of my unzipped pants, my briefs tented with the hard-on that mornings brought.

I pulled the blanket back over my lap—not that he hadn't already gotten an eyeful—and felt a flush of heat rise up my neck. It wasn't that I didn't *want* to offer Mr. Carrington a view of me, but I was feeling a bit off-kilter, not sure what the hell was happening and figuring I probably looked like a mess, if my clothes were any indication.

What was I doing here? And what did he mean about putting on a performance?

"Preston?"

"Mr. Carrington, um—"

"Oh, we're back to Mr. Carrington, are we?" He turned on his heel and walked out of the sitting room. "That's interesting."

Interesting? What did he mean by that?

I quickly scrambled to my feet to follow, but instantly regretted it when it felt like a boulder rolled around inside my skull.

Holy shit. This *was* the hangover from hell.

I grabbed hold of my head to make sure it wouldn't roll off my shoulders, and promised myself I would never, *ever* go to East for anything

again. Even if my life was in danger.

After regaining some semblance of balance, I looked down at my rumpled state and figured I should at least try to look presentable. It was bad enough I was in his house with no knowledge of why. I could at least try to look like I hadn't gone on a two-week bender before I showed up.

I quickly buttoned my shirt, tucked it in, and zipped up my pants, and still couldn't for the life of me remember *why* I'd unzipped them in the first place.

I knew what I wished the reason was, but the likelihood that had happened was nonexistent.

Resigned to the fact that this was as good as it was going to get, I made my way out of the sitting room and spotted my sweater hanging over the banister of the stairs.

That was weird. I didn't remember putting it there, but maybe Mr. Carrington had?

I stepped inside the kitchen, and Mr. Carrington turned from his espresso machine, coffee cup in hand.

"I figured you could do with one of these." He handed over the steaming cup.

"Oh my God. This smells like heaven." I groaned as the aromatic scent hit my nose. When I glanced over the rim of the cup, I noticed Mr. Carrington's eyes were locked on…my lips.

The throbbing in my head was joined by a distinct throb between my legs as he lifted his gaze back to mine and grinned.

"How's your head?"

I wasn't sure, but something about the way he said that made it feel like there was a double meaning there.

"It looked like it was bothering you."

Or maybe it was just me.

"Yeah, it's pretty bad." I grimaced. "I, um, I don't really remember all that much."

I wasn't sure how I expected Mr. Carrington to react, but his deep, sexy chuckle as he turned back to his espresso machine was not it.

Fuck. Clearly I'd embarrassed myself if he was laughing about it. Great. This is what I got for trusting East. I'd wanted to forget last night, forget that humiliating text, and clearly I'd forgotten my brain somewhere in there too.

I might as well just apologize and get it over with.

“Look.” I moved up to the counter, still not entirely sure my legs wouldn’t give out on me. “Whatever I did last night, or said, I’m sorry.”

Mr. Carrington turned back around with his own cup of coffee and ran his eyes over me. How could I have been so stupid to show up on his doorstep last night? It wasn’t like showing up drunk was going to make him think I was less of a mistake.

As regret over anything inappropriate I did began to wash over me, Mr. Carrington walked across the kitchen and stopped a couple of inches from me.

“Why are you sorry?” He leaned against the counter, looking effortlessly sexy. “When you were such a good boy.”

His words immediately hit their mark as the memory of Mr. Carrington standing over me last night flashed through my mind. I’d been in the chair I woke up in, working my dick as I watched him cross the room toward me. At that moment, I hadn’t been feeling any shame, hadn’t been self-conscious in the slightest, not with the hunger I felt for him driving me. And then he was standing there, looking down at me with the same desire in his expression that I’d been feeling, wrapping his hand around mine on my cock, and what he’d said had thrown me over the edge.

“You can follow orders, can you? Then show me. Be a good boy, and come.”

“Holy shit.” It was a miracle I didn’t drop my mug as shock rolled through me. Bits and pieces of the night began to fill my mind, but all I could focus on was Mr. Carrington’s words and the way he was looking at me now. Like he was waiting for me to remember, almost like he hoped I would?

That couldn’t be right. But he’d wanted me to…come for him. And he’d called me a good boy just now for doing what he wanted.

All the blood in my head went straight to my rising cock.

He dropped his gaze to take a greedy look. He wanted me. That much was obvious.

“Looks like you remember,” he said, as a spark of heat appeared in his eyes.

“I… Did we… Did you…?”

He arched a brow. “Did I what?”

Fuck, he wanted me to say it. But I didn't have whatever liquid courage I'd downed last night, and the words tripped on my tongue.

Just say it. He wants you to.

"You ordered me to come," I finally said.

"Hmm." He took a sip of his coffee. "And you did so. Beautifully. All over my hand."

My eyes almost popped out of my head. "All over your… *Fuck*."

His mouth quirked over the edge of his mug. "We didn't get that far."

No shit, because there was no way, even as drunk as I was, I would've forgotten *that*.

My mouth had gone dry, and I took a long drink before summoning up what I needed to ask. It would've been an unhinged question a day ago, but considering what I'd woken up to, maybe it wasn't that crazy.

"But you"—I stopped and wet my lips—"want to?"

Oh my God, I'd just asked Mr. Carrington if he wanted to fuck me. I'd imagined it hundreds of times, and now I'd just put it out there.

Then again, I'd come all over his hand last night. That was so depraved that I was ready to combust again right here and now.

He set his mug aside, and I forgot all about the pounding in my head or the way my body physically ached. It was an altogether different kind of ache that overtook me now. The top of my ass hit the counter as he backed me up against it, and I left my coffee there before gripping the edge of the marble.

He didn't have to touch me for me to feel him everywhere, and his voice was a sexy caress when he said, "I want a lot of things. It's just a matter of whether I should take them."

"Like what?" I pushed, not knowing when I'd get another chance like this. I wanted him to spell it out. To reassure me I wasn't the only one putting himself out there. That he was finally on the same page, or willing to be.

"To start with, I'd like to hear you say my name. My *first* name."

A frown creased my forehead. "I didn't say it last night?"

"You did." Mr. Carrington lowered his gaze to my lips. "But I want you to say it…sober."

If he was worried I was about to tell him this was all some kind of drunken mistake, he had nothing to worry about. I was more than happy to say his name.

“Archer.”

Mr. Carr—*Archer’s*—eyes darkened as though I’d flicked some kind of switch, and he braced a hand on the counter beside me and leaned in until a breeze would’ve had trouble getting between us.

“You’re right,” he said in a voice that vibrated through me. “I have wanted to hear you say that. I just didn’t know how much until you shouted it last night.”

“Touch me right now and I’ll shout it all over again.”

“From just a touch?”

I craned forward, trying to capture his mouth, but he backed up.

“Uh uh, we have things to discuss before that.”

I let out a groan that made him shake his head.

“And apparently patience should be at the top of the list.” He grinned in a way that was so fucking sexy I almost fell to my knees.

Is this really happening?

Archer picked up his mug and eyed me from a safe—but frustrating—distance. “You…are a complication I did not see coming.”

“Well, that’s not true…”

“You’re right. Poor choice of words.”

I ran a palm down my aching length and squeezed, wishing like hell I could come all over again. “No, just frustrating ones.”

“So I see. But you aren’t the only one feeling a little on edge this morning. So I think it’s best if we take a step back and—”

“No.”

“Excuse me?”

I pushed off the counter and walked over to where he stood. I’d come here last night because I’d been shut down. I’d been told what we did was a mistake. Archer wasn’t saying those exact words now, but it felt like that was where he was headed, and I’d be damned if I left his place with him thinking that after everything that he’d just said.

Yeah, because barging into his house, stripping, and coming all over him didn’t get that *message across.*

“I don’t want to take a step back. I don’t want to leave here and you to go to work, only to convince yourself of all the reasons this is a mistake.” I leveled him with a pointed look. “That *I’m* a mistake.”

Archer let out a sigh and put his mug down.

“I shouldn’t have sent that message to you last night.” He hooked a finger through the belt loop in my pants and tugged me forward. “I was trying to push you away, make you see that this, whatever this is between us, it’s…”

“Complicated?”

“To say the least.”

Feeling brave, I put a hand to the lapel of his jacket. “It doesn’t have to be.”

Archer scoffed and released me, taking a step back. “Preston, this would be nothing *but* complicated.”

“Why? Because—”

“I’m on the board at Astor. I’m president of the Elysium. You’re twenty-plus years my junior, *and* I’m friends with your parents. Oh, and let’s not forget that to the outside world you’re straight and dating my daughter. I need to think about this, Preston, and so do you.”

“So that’s it?” I blinked, trying to wrap my mind around the fact that my one and only time with Archer Carrington would be a drunken haze of a memory. “I’ve waited so long for something like this to happen with you, and the fact it’s blurry— Wait.” My eyes dropped to the impeccably tailored suit jacket he wore, zeroing in on his right bicep. “Do you have a tattoo on your arm, or did I imagine that?”

Archer’s brow rose, but he didn’t answer me. Instead, he finished off his coffee and headed to the sink to rinse and stack his mug. When he crossed back to me, he pushed my coffee in front of me.

“I have to go to work and you have to go to school.” A soft, mocking laugh left him as he shook his head. “Not complicated… Right.”

He went to step around me, but I grabbed his arm. “The tattoo?”

Fire flickered in Archer’s eyes, the heat from seconds ago returning. “Be a good boy, finish your coffee, and let me go to work.”

My dick jerked at the request. “And if I do that?”

“Then the next time I see you, I’ll let you look for yourself.”

“Fuck.” I let go of his arm and nodded. “I can do that.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

Archer left the kitchen, and I followed, leaning against the doorframe to watch him walk down the hall to the front entrance.

“So that means there’ll be a next time?” I said as he reached for the front door.

He stopped and glanced back, his scorching gaze traveling over me, making my heart pound in time to my pulsing dick.

“Well, I can’t exactly avoid you. You’re dating my daughter. Have a good day, Preston.”

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NINE

preston

TO SAY I was in a daze would be an understatement. The fact that I was even referring to Archer now as…well, Archer, and not Mr. Carrington, was a mind trip in and of itself, and so was the way I'd shown up on his doorstep in the first place. I was starting to fill in some of the blanks from last night, but even those details didn't matter much. Not when I remembered the way Archer had ordered me to come, that he'd watched me with the same hunger I felt for him. The same thing he'd shown this morning when he asked me to say his name. When he'd basically admitted he wanted to fuck me but that he shouldn't want to.

When he said he'd think about it…

I didn't bother hiding my smile, since Archer was already off to work, and I was currently sitting alone on the stoop of his brownstone waiting for the taxi I'd requested. There'd been no point calling the driver I shared with the guys, Scotty, since he would be taking everyone to Astor right about now. There was no way I wanted any of them getting wind of where I was and what I'd been doing. They probably all figured I was still sleeping off my hangover, and that was exactly what I wanted them to assume.

I stood up, brushing off the back of my pants as the taxi made its way down the street. My breaths came out in warm puffs of air, and even though I'd put my sweater on over my long-sleeved shirt, it was still freezing.

"Waldorf Towers, East Fiftieth and Park," I said once I'd slid into the back seat.

As the row of picturesque brownstones began to fly by, I thought back to those texts from last night, the way they'd set me off and had me doing

things I'd never normally do.

What the hell had I been thinking? I hadn't been, at least not clearly. As much as I wanted to blame East for indulging me, it was my fault, and honestly, probably a good thing. I wasn't sure I would've had the guts to put it all out there for Archer if I hadn't had way too much liquid courage running through my veins.

Although by "putting it out there," I hadn't meant my dick.

I couldn't help the smile that wanted to break free, because holy shit. Now that the gaps in my night were filling in, I couldn't believe how fucking ballsy I'd been. I'd gotten myself off in front of Archer to show him how much I wanted him… Who did that? Not me. Only Preston-on-psychotic-shots me.

Anyone else would've called the cops on my ass, but Archer did something entirely unexpected—he got involved. Issued me a challenge. And then let me *come all over his hand.* God, I wished I could remember it in more vivid detail. Wished that my head hadn't been pounding so bad this morning, so I could've had a redo.

But…there would be a next time, right? Archer had been giving all kinds of mixed messages this morning. Even after trying to push me away last night with his texts, he didn't seem all that intent on following through—giving me all the reasons why we couldn't and shouldn't try anything, but then telling me he'd let me check his body for the tattoo I thought I remembered him having…

He wasn't saying no to me. Not at all.

But he was right. That *did* make things complicated. Especially when Serena's face popped into my mind. I didn't keep shit from her, and this was the kind of thing that could break a friendship.

I couldn't lose her. She was my best friend.

She'd understand.

Right?

I needed to talk to her. I needed to come clean about the charity event, telling her dad to ask her about us, last night, and everything I was feeling… But she'd be heading to class—

No, wait. It was Tuesday. She'd be at her internship this morning in the Fashion District.

"Actually, change of plans," I said to the driver. "I need to go to Thirty-Eighth and Seventh."

His annoyed gaze met mine in the rearview mirror. “You sure about that?”

Was I? I’d be potentially fucking things up, but she deserved to know. We’d promised each other that much.

“Final answer,” I told the driver, and he nodded once before pulling into the turn lane that was backed up beyond belief.

Not wanting to sit there for an hour, I said, “It might be quicker to take Eleventh down to—”

“You wanna drive?”

I snapped my mouth shut, annoyed that he was obviously taking the long route, but that was the difference between having a driver who got paid by the minute and one who was paid handsomely to get us to our destination in the quickest way possible.

With a sigh, I laid my head back and closed my eyes, settling in for the drive. At least I’d have time to try to remember if I’d really seen a tattoo on Archer’s shirtless body last night or if I’d made it up. And if I hadn’t, what had it looked like…?

I must’ve dozed off, because my phone buzzing in my pocket jerked me awake. It was a text from Donovan, asking where I was.

Oh, right. I hadn’t even thought about the fact that I’d never skipped school before, so my absence would definitely sound a few alarms with my friends. I needed to play up my whereabouts so they didn’t ask too many questions or come looking for me.

Did you miss East trying to kill me last night?

DONOVAN:

I don’t think anyone in the club missed that. Feeling like shit?

Let’s just say I won’t be leaving the bed today.

DONOVAN:

Order up Carol’s special from downstairs.

I wrinkled my nose, wondering what in the hell kind of healthy concoction Donovan was recommending, because the guy liked to keep in shape a little too much for the rest of us.

Does it have grass in it?

DONOVAN:
Just trust me. It'll help.

The last time I trusted you, I threw up kale and ginger. Do you know how bad ginger burns coming back up?

DONOVAN:
Fine. West says order the grease platter, then. Feel better.

The taxi jerked to a sudden stop, and I almost hit the seat in front of me. The total for the ride flashed on the screen, and I swiped my credit card, ready to get out of the car already. I hadn't eaten in a while, and I needed something to soak up the churning in my stomach, but it would have to wait. I needed to talk to Serena first.

I headed into the building where the designer she was interning for had their showroom and took the elevator up, and when my stomach did a backflip midway through the ascent, I promised myself I'd never drink again.

This wasn't the first time I'd been here—I'd met up with Serena several times for lunch or to pick her up after school. But never had I skipped a class to be here, and *never* had I shown up to tell her what I was about to.

As the doors opened on her floor, I stepped out and took in a deep breath, thankful I'd managed to keep my roiling stomach under some sort of control. God, it had gotten worse and worse since leaving Archer's house, and as I wiped my sweaty palms on my pant leg, I realized why—guilt.

I was sick to my stomach not because of East's poisonous concoctions but because I'd been lying to my best friend. Well, that was going to stop right fucking now. It was time to lay this all out on the table before things went any further.

The showroom was a bustling hive of activity when I stepped inside—designers, models, and assistants in different stages of measuring, fitting, and dressing for whatever upcoming project or show they were working on.

I scanned the controlled chaos, searching out a high blonde ponytail swaying around dainty shoulders several feet from me, as Serena stood back from the gorgeous model standing on a pedestal.

I swallowed around the lump that had formed in my throat, and reminded myself that the sooner I did this, the sooner it would done.

Man, what I wouldn't do for a "Van Talk" right about now. Out of all my friends, Donovan was the absolute best when it came to handing out relationship advice, and I knew he'd have some fantastic ideas on how to deal with this.

Only problems were: a) he thought I was straight and b) I wasn't actually *in* a relationship with Serena. Well, not the kind he thought, anyway. Also, how did one tell their friend that they were in a bind because they wanted to fuck their fake girlfriend's *dad*?

Maybe Archer was right. This was going to be complicated.

"Can you turn a little to the left for me?" Serena studied the lines of the garment she was pinning with painstaking detail as I walked up behind her and whispered by her ear, "Hello."

She whirled around, her bright, sunny smile lighting up her features when her eyes landed on me. But the smile somewhat faded as she got a really *good* look at me—my disheveled state was unusual, to say the least.

"Hello yourself." She chuckled and leaned in to kiss my cheek. "You skipped school? Must've been a big night?"

Only the biggest of my life. "Uh, yeah, you could say that. Do you have a minute?"

Serena's eyes narrowed a fraction as they searched my face. "Sure." She held up a hand for me to give her a second and walked back over to her model. "Can you give me five?"

"No problem." He stepped down from the pedestal and nodded in my direction. The second we were alone, I grabbed Serena's arm and led her to one of the empty corner offices that overlooked the city.

"Preston, what has gotten into—"

"I kissed your dad." I hadn't meant to blurt it out, or even start the conversation that way. But my brain was still clearly trying to recover and function again after everything it had been through in the last twelve hours.

A mix of wide-eyed surprise and disbelieving amusement had her chuckling. “What?”

“At the charity event last month,” I said, running my fingers through my hair and starting to pace. “You wanted me to go check on him after his ex tried to make a scene, so I did, and I kissed him.”

Serena only blinked at me for a long moment as I continued to wear out the floor, and then she snorted. “Yeah, okay, suuure.”

“I’m serious.”

“Seriously pranking my ass. Did Travis put you up to this? He did, didn’t he?”

“Funny about that,” I said, scratching at my jaw. “He walked in on us when it happened.”

A burst of laughter had me whirling around. “Oh, Preston.” She shook her head and patted me on the chest. “Tell Travis he’ll have to do better than that. I need to get back to work, and you should probably go home and change. Is that the same outfit you wore to dinner?” She started for the door.

“Yes, because I slept at your dad’s house last night.”

Wow, way to put all that out there.

Her feet faltered and she slowly turned to face me. Maybe it was my expression, maybe it was that she was finally hearing me, but her brows pulled together as she said, “You’re not joking?”

Fuck, please don’t let her hate me.

“No. I’m not joking. And I can explain.”

Her eyes widened to saucers. “Chair.” I quickly dragged a nearby chair over just in time for her to fall into it, and then dropped to my knee in front of her.

“Do you need a paper bag?”

“Uh, not yet. Unless you’re about to give me details I don’t want to know, and then I might have to vomit.”

I’d meant to breathe into, but no, she seemed to be breathing well enough.

“Just…rewind. You kissed my dad?” she said, shaking her head. “Preston… What the hell? Why?”

Why? Because he was the most beautiful man I’d ever seen in my life, and I couldn’t *not* kiss him when the opportunity arose.

“It just happened—”

“At the charity event?”

“Yes—”

“Last *month*?”

When I nodded, she smacked the shit out of my arm.

“You kept this to yourself and didn’t tell me for a *month*?”

“I know, that was a fucked thing to do, but I didn’t want to lose you, and I didn’t think it’d ever happen again. I thought it was just all the champagne and whatever he was drinking and just…”

“Preston,” she admonished me, before sighing.

“I know. Feel free to yell at me. Throw something. Throw *me* out the window.”

“They don’t open. But I might actually need that paper bag after all, because ew. You couldn’t choose someone else’s dad?” She dropped her hand back into her lap. “I mean, you’ve joked about thinking he was hot, but I didn’t think you were serious.”

I didn’t even bother trying to deny it. “Where do you think you get your good looks from? Yeah, he’s hot.”

“And he…” She swallowed hard, her face starting to contort. “He kissed you back?”

Kissed me, felt me up…let me come over his hand last night…

“Yeah, he did, but then he acted like it never happened, so I didn’t know if he even remembered it. But then I went to his office to help with the Winter Ball stuff, and there was all this tension and I wanted it to happen again.”

Serena was just staring, hanging on every word like she wanted to know but didn’t. “And did it happen again?”

I shook my head. “No, he kept turning me down. Can you believe it?”

“Can I believe *you* are the one pursuing my dad? Not in a million freakin’ years. Who are you? And what the hell happened last night?”

Oh God, like I wanted to admit the whole embarrassing ordeal to anyone, much less Serena. I’d leave out the dirty details, but I supposed she deserved to know what her fake boyfriend had been getting up to when she wasn’t around.

“Okay, I’ll preface this by saying I’m not proud of my behavior, but he might’ve texted me that I was a mistake and the kiss was a mistake, and I *might’ve* let East get me a little drunk—”

“You let *East* give you drinks?”

“Shots.”

“Oh my God.” She dropped her face into her hands, and her voice was muffled as she said, “Go on.”

“So I was drunk and a little pissed about the texts, and I might’ve shown up on Archer’s—”

“*Archer’s?*”

Shit. “—your dad’s doorstep and basically forced my way inside, and…” I didn’t need to go further than that. “I mean, we didn’t do anything…” Not like I didn’t *try*. “But I want to, and that’s the problem, and that’s why I’m here.”

It was dead silent for way too long, so long I thought maybe she’d fallen asleep in her hands. But then she lifted her head, propping her chin on her fists.

“You like him.”

I hesitated, then nodded.

“And you think he likes you?”

I nodded again.

She looked past me, thinking that over.

“So basically, you seduced my dad.”

“Um. Yeah.”

“*Twice*, Preston.” She held her fingers up just in case I didn’t hear, but I was pretty sure the entire showroom heard that.

“I know. I didn’t plan it, but when I got there and saw him, it just kind of…happened. You know how it is.”

“I know how it is?” She cocked her head to the side. “Yeah, I’m not sure that’s a great argument. You see, I’m not trying to sleep with your father.”

“Ew.”

“*Exactly*.” She let out a sigh, and when she got to her feet, I followed. “You get how embarrassing this is, right? You kissed my dad when he thought *we* were a couple. So when I was pouring my heart out to him the other night, thinking I was telling him some kind of big secret about you and me, he already knew. That’s kind of humiliating.”

“No.” I shook my head vehemently. “He didn’t know. He didn’t know anything. He thought I was insane at the charity event—that’s why he kept insisting it was a mistake. Well, until I insinuated you and me were, um, something else entirely.”

“I see.”

Silence stretched between us then, and the longer we stood there the louder it grew, until I could barely stand the own noise in my head.

"Please don't hate me." Again with the word vomiting. It was like I'd woken up this morning and someone else took control of my brain.

"I don't hate you." She reached for the hands I didn't even realize I was twisting in front of me. "I could never hate you. I'm just… This is just… It's a lot. I'm processing. Give me a minute."

I walked over to the window and stared out at the city, wondering what Archer was doing in that moment and how he'd feel if he knew I was here telling Serena everything that had happened between us.

"So, um, you and my dad…" I turned to see Serena's cute nose scrunched up like she was still trying to make sense of this. But news flash, *I* was still trying to, and I'd felt this way for weeks now. "That's kinda crazy, Preston. I mean, if anyone finds out, that shit is going to blow up."

"I don't plan on anyone else finding out. I'm good at keeping my private life private. But I needed you to know. I hate lying to you."

"Well, I appreciate that." She flashed a rueful grin. "Even if I feel like I need an emergency session with my therapist."

I snorted and then grabbed her hand, tugging her into my side. "I really am sorry for lying."

"Uh huh. But not sorry for kissing my dad."

"Well…maybe not that part."

She bumped into my side as we headed for the door, but just as we were about to step through, she stopped and looked up at me.

"Wait, does that mean you want to end *our* arrangement? I know I asked you the other day if you wanted to date—"

"No. No. I don't want that to change. I don't even know if anything else is going to happen. I just wanted you to know, just in case…"

"So this is just asking permission to bone my dad?" She waved her hand. "Gross, but whatever. Go forth. Just please, for the love of God, don't tell me *any*-fucking-thing."

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TEN

archer

THE SMOKE FROM Benoit's cigar wafted in my direction from where he sat across from me at the Carnegie Club. Lounged back in a deep-seated velvet armchair, he had been studying me keenly the entire time I'd been flipping through the menu, but I couldn't seem to concentrate on any of the words on the page.

All I could think about—all I'd been able to think about all damn day—was Preston. From his showing up on my doorstep, to the sexy performance that I never should've watched, but couldn't seem to help myself, to leaving him on my stoop this morning with the promise I'd let him look at me a little closer next time…

Had I lost my mind? Gone temporarily insane? Was a gorgeous young guy all it took to set off a midlife crisis?

Benoit took a deep drag of his cigar and motioned for the waiter. "He'll have the same," he said, nodding toward me. "And we'll take a bottle of your best cognac."

I arched a brow. "A bottle?"

"Mhmm." He smiled at the waiter. "That'll be all."

I shut the menu, setting it on the low table between us. "Rough day?"

"You tell me."

My eyes shot up to his, and a wicked smile curved his lips.

He glanced down at the stogie he held between his fingers and practically purred, "I have a theory."

"And what's that?" I settled back in the chair and rubbed at where my neck and shoulder met. The tight muscle made me wish I'd gone for a

massage instead of drinks and a smoke with Benoit.

“You seem tense.”

“That’s not a theory.”

“No, but it’s a symptom of my theory.”

“Do you plan on spitting it out, or do you want me to guess? I haven’t had a drink yet.”

“I’ll ignore the obvious pun, but only because I’m far too curious about what the pretty young thing from the other night has done to get under your skin. What was his name? Presley?”

How the hell did he do that? Know exactly what I was thinking?

The waiter returned, and as he went about setting up our drinks, I cleared my throat. “Preston.”

“Ah, yes, sweet, gorgeous trouble, that Preston.”

He had no fucking idea how right he was about that.

“Still not hearing a theory,” I said, taking the glass the waiter handed me. I lowered my nose to sniff the fruity aroma and then took a small sip, letting it swish around on my tongue. When I nodded, the waiter poured a couple more fingers into my glass before doing the same for Benoit.

Another man arrived with my cigar and went through the ritual of clipping and lighting the end, getting it nice and even before presenting it to me.

The first drag was like heaven. It was almost enough to make me forget that Benoit had somehow nailed the reason my mind had been elsewhere.

Once we were alone again, Benoit tapped his fingers along the arm of his chair. “You’ve done something you feel both excited and guilty about. That’s my theory.”

“And you think that has something to do with Preston?”

He raised a brow, challenging me to tell him otherwise.

But I couldn’t. He’d always been able to read me too well, a fact that pissed me off now, when I wanted more time to figure out what the hell I was going to do.

“Goddamn you.”

A chuckle escaped the far-too-perceptive man across from me as I puffed on the cigar.

“What can I say? It’s a gift.” Benoit tilted his head. “Or maybe it’s just that I could sense all that sexual tension between you two. Things were bound to combust. So…did they?”

Combust? Well, *he* did. All over my hand.

Shifting in my chair as that sinful memory did things to my dick, I tried to give a nonchalant shrug. “Possibly.”

Benoit groaned. “I should’ve ordered something stronger than cognac to loosen those lips.”

“No,” I said, and shook my head. “Too much alcohol is what started things in the first place.”

“Oh, I see. So your head’s still a little sore from last night, then.”

That’s right—Benoit didn’t know about the charity event. He just assumed whatever my transgressions were began the night before, but I’d been keeping this little secret close to the vest for a few weeks now. Not allowing myself to think about the kiss that night with Preston. Forcing myself to deny the instant chemistry I’d had with the gorgeous young man who’d been coming and going from my house over the last few years as… Serena’s boyfriend.

I took a long sip of my drink, hoping the smooth liquid would help the feeling of unease that hit whenever I thought about *that* particular part of this insane situation.

“Archer?”

“Huh?”

“I asked about your head. Were you drinking last night?”

“No.” I eyed my friend over the rim of my glass. “But that would at least give me an excuse for what I *did* do.”

“Ah. Something with him.”

“Yes. But last night wasn’t the first time.”

Benoit’s hand stopped midway to his mouth, and his lips parted in surprise before curving into a sly grin that told me I was in a whole world of shit.

“Well, look at you, Mr. Robinson—sorry, Mr. Carrington.”

The reminder of what Preston had called me as he’d stroked himself in my sitting room had my own dick stiffening between my thighs. Something that wasn’t lost on Benoit as I shifted to prop my ankle up on my knee.

“Boy oh boy, whatever thought just popped into your head, I want to know *all* about it.”

“Nothing popped—”

“Something sure did, *mon ami*. It’s between your thighs and getting harder by the second. Tell me, did that thought include Preston doing

something like this?” Benoit brought his cigar up to his mouth and wrapped his pouty lips around it, sucking on the head.

“No. Jesus.”

When he did it again and blew the smoke in my direction, he batted his lashes. “But you want him to, don’t you?”

“Oh for fuck’s sake.”

“That’s not a no,” Benoit crooned as he lounged back in his seat, propping his arm on the velvet frame. “But if he didn’t suck on your”—Benoit’s eyes moved to my cigar, and he grinned—“head, then what exactly did he do? The nervous energy coming off you tells me it was more than a kiss but less than a fuck, so…”

“Are you out of your mind? Of course I didn’t fuck him.”

“Yet.”

I quickly glanced around us before bringing my eyes back to his, knowing the only way to stop his wild guesses was to give him something substantial to feast on.

“We kissed last month at the Elysium charity event, or he kissed me, and then—”

“Hold the hell on.” Benoit’s eyes narrowed on me. “That tasty little morsel kissed you *last* month and you didn’t bother to tell me? I thought we were friends.”

“We are, but—”

“Archer Carrington, this is unacceptable. I told you when I slept with that sheikh in Dubai this past summer. How dare you keep something this delicious from me?”

The pout was back and in full force as he slumped back in his seat looking all kinds of put out, and he had every reason to be. He was right—I had kept this from him. Hell, I’d done my best to keep it from myself. But after last night, I’d realized the time for that had come and gone. I was feeling things for Preston that I’d never expected to, and I needed to work out what to do with that. So I’d called the one person I knew wouldn’t judge me—unless, of course, it was about keeping my scandalous secrets to myself.

“I wasn’t trying to keep it from you.” I let out a sigh and rested my cigar on the tray between us, leaning forward to say in a lower voice, “I was just — Look, I was ashamed of myself, okay? As far as I knew, Preston was straight and dating my daughter. I didn’t expect it to ever go anywhere.”

Benoit leaned forward also. “But it did, didn’t it?”

I licked my lips. The taste of cognac lingered there. “It did. And I think I want it to go…further.”

“I knew it. I told you that boy wasn’t straight. And you called me delusional.” He let out a huff, but a sort of glee lit his eyes. Of course he was enjoying this. This kind of debauchery was what he lived for.

“I didn’t exactly have the whole story then,” I admitted. “I assumed Serena was actually in a relationship with him—I mean, it’s been years. And the whole fucking time it’s been nothing but a cover. How did I not see that, Benny? She told me they’ve been faking it for everyone, that they’re nothing more than friends, and I—” I ran a hand over my face, so many emotions warring inside me that I didn’t know where to focus. I took in a deep breath, holding it for a few seconds before letting it out. “I need you to tell me this is crazy. That I shouldn’t be thinking about him.”

“Oh, honey, you chose the wrong person for that, and you know it. I don’t make it a habit to talk someone out of a good time.”

“Even if it could blow up my world?”

“Always focusing on the negative.” Benoit tsked. “Why don’t you focus on blowing something much more enjoyable instead? Like your pretty young thing. Now you know for sure he’ll enjoy it.”

“Jesus.” I lifted my glass but then thought better of it and picked up the cigar instead. The latter wouldn’t lead to nearly as many bad decisions, and right now my head was full of them.

“Fine.” Benoit sighed, swirling the contents of the glass in his hand. “Is it complicated? Apparently so. But no one needs to know what happens behind closed doors.”

That sounded so much like what Preston had said about no one having to know that I startled a bit.

“It’s not like you’ll be parading him for everyone at the Winter Ball, for Christ’s sake. So I say enjoy that tight, smooth ass while you can. You’re not getting any younger. Well, until you agree to a little Botox.”

Something about his words stung, and it wasn’t the reference to my age. Sure, I kept my personal life under wraps, but it wasn’t because I was hiding anything. Whatever this was with Preston was the first time I’d actually need to keep things a secret.

The thought should’ve turned me off, so why was it that a thrill shot up my spine just imagining sneaking around with him? It was wrong on so

many levels, but the thought of bending him over my desk the same way he'd practically lain across it the other night had my cock stirring.

I hadn't felt such an intense reaction to anyone in so long, so why shouldn't I indulge myself this once? Or twice.

No one had to find out. Preston was a master at keeping a secret, that much had become clear.

He wanted me. And God knew I couldn't stop thinking about him. Shirt spread wide, pants around his thighs, that mouth-watering dick in hand…

"You're right."

Benoit's eyes widened, and he almost choked on his cigar. He coughed, waving at the smoke. "I am?"

"Why do you sound so surprised?"

"Because you gave in so easily. I had at least two more rounds of reasons for why you shouldn't deny your dick." He blew on his nails and polished them against the shoulder of his shirt. "Haven't lost my touch."

I didn't have the heart to tell Benoit that it was Preston's image and the idea of touching him again that had been the deciding factor here. No, I was going to let my friend bask in his hand at my undoing. That way, if I fell flat on my ass, I had someone other than myself to blame.

"Well, then." Benoit picked up the bottle of cognac and poured us both another glass. "Cheers to you, *mon ami*. What are you doing here with me? Go get yourself some of that hot young ass."

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ELEVEN

preston

I DIDN’T USUALLY get roped into dinner with my parents more than once a month, but my father was trying to woo a new senator into his clique and seemed to think having me there somehow helped. It’d been a last-minute request, and Serena already had plans, which meant I’d be suffering through the next couple hours on my own.

Lucky me.

As my father droned on about why the latest bill was shit, and my mother made small talk with the man’s wife, I reached for another oyster. At least for the moment I was able to sit there in my thoughts, which had been all over the place in the two days since I’d left Archer’s and confessed all to Serena. We hadn’t talked about it since—not that there was an update, because I hadn’t seen or heard from Archer. I knew I’d be seeing him this weekend, since I’d volunteered all the guys to help out at the Elysium on Saturday, but I wasn’t sure if I should be the one to make the first move. Hell, I’d already shown up on his doorstep, so was it wrong that I wanted him to come to *me*?

“Isn’t that right, Preston?”

My father’s tone indicated it wasn’t the first time he’d asked me that question, and I brushed my lips with my napkin before answering.

“I’m sorry?”

His colleague glanced at my father before smiling gently at me. “Senator Abernathy tells me you’ve got plans to work in his office next term.”

Inwardly, I sighed, not ready to have this conversation yet again, but now wasn't the time or place for that argument. So I smiled back like the good son I was and gave a polite response.

"It's been discussed. My classes and volunteer work take up quite a bit of time here, but we're trying to work it out."

The man seemed satisfied, even impressed, with my answer, but I could feel the narrowed eyes of my father boring into me.

Unbothered, I reached for another oyster and washed it down with champagne. At least tonight I wouldn't be leaving this place starving and in need of pizza, not with what I'd seen on the menu.

"Oh, look who it is," my mother said, and I glanced at the entrance behind me—only to do a double take.

Sometimes it felt like this city was overwhelmingly big, and other times, like now, it felt confined to a small group. A *very* small group.

Because standing just inside the entrance was the man I hadn't been able to stop thinking about, wrapped up in a dark wool trench coat and scarf, a pink tinge to his nose and cheeks from the cold.

Even fully bundled up, Archer Carrington was unbelievably beautiful. He'd already caught the attention of those at my table, and I also noticed several other diners looking in his direction. It was sheer magnetism, and the effect on me was instant. Especially when he tugged at the fingers of his gloves and his gaze locked on mine. It was so quick, that flash of heat and the way he faltered when he saw me, but then his eyes moved past me to those at my table, and it was like he'd never reacted at all.

He tucked his gloves into his jacket pocket as the hostess began to escort him and a couple of others I recognized from the Elysium board in our direction.

I quickly turned back to see my mother waving at Archer and tried to calm the sudden pounding of my heart, among other things.

Of all the restaurants in the city, why did the man I'd gotten myself off in front of two days ago have to be right between me and my father?

God, could this get any worse?

"Archer." My father pushed back his seat, getting to his feet to greet the newcomer, and I hoped he didn't expect me to do the same. The last thing I needed was to announce to the table just how happy I was to see…my girlfriend's dad.

I winced a little, hating that that was how they would view him. As Serena's father. My future father-in-law. The president of the Elysium. Mr. Carrington was the perfect in-law in my parents' eyes. Bet that would change if they knew what a "good boy" he thought their son was.

"Preston." My mother's lilting laugh tore me out of my thoughts and back to reality. "Are you coming down with something? You've been distracted all night."

Great, thanks, Mom. "No, no. I'm fine."

"Then how about you find your manners and say hello to Mr. Carrington?"

I glanced up at Archer and his other guests, and his slow smile did absolutely nothing to help my *distracted* situation.

"Hi." That was all I could manage. A lame-ass "hi" as I stared up into the most handsome face I'd ever seen.

"Hello." I couldn't be positive, but I felt there was a glint in his eyes. "Enjoying the oysters tonight, are we?"

The empty shells in front of me were proof enough of that. Hell, maybe I could blame my stiff dick on them too. Instead of the sexy-as-sin man looking at me like he knew *exactly* where my mind had just gone.

I cleared my throat. "Um, yeah, you should try them for yourself. You know, since Serena won't touch them."

"Hmm, I think I just might."

"You should join us," my father offered, and I hoped that the sheer panic I felt in that moment wasn't splashed all over my face, because *fuck*, it would be absolute torture to have to sit through dinner with Archer and not be able to talk to him about what had happened between us.

"No, I don't want to interrupt."

Oh thank God.

"But I hope you all have a lovely night." Archer's hand dropped to my shoulder. "As always, it's a pleasure to see you *again*, Preston."

As my father took a seat and Archer left to go to his table, his words from the other morning about whether he had a tattoo echoed through my head: *The next time I see you, I'll let you look for yourself.*

Wait, this *was* that next time. Right?

The insinuation was right there. That I was seeing him *again*.

That was not lost on me. At least, I didn't think it was. I hadn't imagined that, or the sexual tension I'd felt humming between us.

The comment about the oysters, the touch on my shoulder? That wasn't in my head. But…we were in public. It wasn't like I could march over there and demand he give me what he promised now, could I?

I looked in his direction, trying to ascertain if I was living in a fantasy land or—

No. I didn't think I was imagining it. Not when Archer reached for the buttons of his coat and, as he undid them, looked in my direction.

I knew I needed to look away, to not make it so damn obvious I was watching him, but it felt impossible. Especially when he chose the seat that directly faced me. He could've sat with his back to me, ignoring that I was even there, but maybe he wanted to watch me like I wanted to watch him. I wasn't sure if that made my night better or worse, because it would be agony having him so close but unable to get my fill.

Glancing at the serving tray of oysters on our table that only I seemed to be enjoying, I picked one up, deciding two could play this game. It was clear Archer wanted to tease me tonight, which, I could admit, might be fun. Especially if I played along.

I lifted the shell to my lips, letting the oyster and its delicious toppings slide into my mouth, and as I swallowed, I saw Archer watching. Taking advantage of his attention, I brushed my thumb along the corner of my mouth, swiping some wayward juice before sucking it between my lips. I didn't need to look at him to see his reaction, because even from across the room I could feel it—that heat, that tension, that was there between us, and it hadn't dulled just because there was a room full of other people.

A buzz of excitement ran through me as I set the discarded shell aside and licked my lips. *Your move,* I thought, glancing his way and meeting his eyes for a brief moment. A hint of a sexy smirk was all the reaction I got as he beckoned for the waiter.

I wondered what he'd be having tonight. If I'd be able to taste it if I kissed him. *When* I kissed him. Because after days of radio silence, seeing him was a shock to the system, and I couldn't promise myself I wouldn't show up on his doorstep after this dinner was over.

I was just hoping for an invitation this time.

Trying not to look his way was a challenge, but as salads were placed in front of each of us, I at least *attempted* to seem like I was listening to my father's conversation. I couldn't tell what was being said, and I hoped like hell they wouldn't ask me anything. But my father hadn't appreciated my

last answer, so I had a feeling he wouldn't be giving me more opportunities to make him look bad. He probably regretted inviting me now, which I'd get an earful about later.

I didn't care. I couldn't. Not when my entire focus was elsewhere.

Chancing a look, I noticed immediately the way Archer's fingers were casually wrapped around the stem of a wine glass, and when he sensed me looking, he began to wind them up and down. Stroking. Archer was stroking his glass like he was playing with my dick, and the way my body reacted, you would've thought he really was.

Dammit. It'd be too obvious to reach beneath the table and adjust my pants to give my growing erection a little breathing room, and Archer knew it too.

Let the games begin.

Digging into my salad, I ignored him for as long as I could, which wasn't more than a handful of minutes. Pathetic, really, but it wasn't my fault I was a moth to his flame, and he was *really* fucking hot.

The opportunity for another tease came unexpectedly when the new senator's wife accidentally spilled her wine. I jumped to my feet, leaning across the table with my napkin to help her before it flowed onto her dress. When she was taken care of, I glanced at Archer, and his look was so familiar that my stomach flipped.

It was just like the moment in his office when I'd leaned over his desk, trying to make my intentions clear. He wasn't the first one to look away this time as I settled back in my seat, feeling his eyes still on me. I reached for a new napkin, placing the linen on my lap and wiping off the wine from my fingers. As a rush of waitstaff surrounded our table to help clean the mess, one reached for my salad plate.

"Oh, I'm not finished—" My words were cut off when I noticed him drop something small and folded beside the plate, the move deliberate but not enough to catch anyone else's attention with the distraction happening across the table.

The waiter smiled at me and pulled his hand back. "My apologies, sir. Enjoy."

As I nodded at him, I casually swiped what he'd dropped and lowered it to my lap then unfolded the paper napkin. Surprise rolled through me as I read the note. I looked up to make sure the right person had smuggled this to me.

Archer pushed back his chair, rising to his feet and making his excuses to those at his table. As he buttoned his suit jacket, his eyes caught mine, and that was all I needed to know.

I watched him out of the corner of my eye as he headed in the direction of the restrooms and shoved his note in the pocket of my pants.

The one that had said,

Men's room. NOW.

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TWELVE

archer

I'VE LOST MY fucking mind.

That was the only thing that made any sense. I was standing in the men's restroom in one of the most exclusive restaurants in the city, with a hard-on inspired by Preston Abernathy.

I couldn't remember the last time I'd felt such a dynamic pull to someone before, and now that I'd given myself permission to feel *whatever* was happening between us, it was like a switch had been flipped and I was unable to remain impervious in his presence.

Something that was blatantly obvious, given I had just left my dinner guests at the table claiming a business emergency, and then ordered Preston to leave his family and come meet me so I could…what?

I had no idea.

It wasn't like this space was very private. Anyone could come and go.

I paced the length of the room, which was nicer than most apartment lobbies in the city, before bracing my hands on the sink and looking at my reflection in the mirror.

What the hell was I doing? His parents were right outside, for fuck's sake. But that did nothing to calm my pulse which was throbbing in time with my dick. If anything, it made both throb a little harder.

That was how I knew I was in a world of trouble.

The door was pushed open and Preston stepped inside. I straightened from the sink and took a second to drink in the sight of him.

His cheeks were a little rosy, and I couldn't help but wonder if that was from the champagne he'd been drinking, or the arousal I'd seen when he'd

glanced back at me after practically crawling across the table—which I knew he'd done for me and me alone.

Preston bit down into his lower lip and slipped his hands into his pockets, and there was no mistaking he knew how to play the tease, because the move automatically had me looking where he wanted me to. His pressed pants were doing little to hide his erection, and the way the material was stretching across him outlined his hard-on in an almost indecent way.

A soft groan drew my gaze back to his, and when I saw him staring at my mouth, I realized I'd licked my lips. Not on purpose, but because damn, he made me feel fucking *greedy*.

"Hi," he said, much like he had when I first arrived at the restaurant. But there was no panic on his face this time. His pillowy lip was swollen from where he'd been biting down on it, and I wanted nothing more than to take him into one of these stalls and make those lips of his even poutier from sucking on my—

"You told me to come to you…" He moved away from the door and walked over, and though every alarm bell was going off in my head, I shut each one down with every step he took.

"I did." I smoothed a hand down my jacket to the couple of buttons and undid them. Then I shrugged out of it, setting it aside on the counter.

Preston's hungry gaze roved down over me until it reached my thick length, and when he sucked in a breath, I put a finger under his chin and raised his face back to mine.

"Again. It's good to see you can follow an order."

We were only inches apart now, and I couldn't stop myself from running a thumb across his lower lip like he had earlier when taunting me. He was just so damn beautiful.

"I promised you something the next time I saw you. Do you remember?"

He nodded. "I remember."

"And do you still want to know?"

"More than my next breath." My eyes flicked to the door behind him, and as all the reasons I shouldn't do this flashed through my mind again, Preston said, "You don't have to worry."

"Worry?"

"That someone will come in." He nipped at my thumb. "You're not the only one who can pay off a waiter."

Of course. Why didn’t I think of that? Preston was a Park Avenue Prince. The refined, well-bred façade he presented was deceiving.

“You didn’t think I was going to risk being interrupted, did you?”

“Hmm, I suppose I should’ve expected that. You are rather… resourceful.”

Preston’s pupils dilated as he again looked down my body. “When I want something, I’m very…single-minded.”

Now that was a fucking turn on.

There was something to be said for having the sole attention of someone as young and attractive as Preston focused on you. Hell, if they could bottle the feeling, it would sell better than that little blue pill. Because right now, I was so turned on that it was a miracle I didn’t bend him over the sink and take him right there.

Preston moved his hands to my waist and pulled my shirt out. I didn’t lift a hand to stop him or help him, practically holding my breath as I kept my eyes on his and he began to unbutton my shirt.

The cool air across my stomach as he parted the material made me shiver—or maybe that was a reaction from his fingers grazing my skin.

God, I wanted his hands on me. He barely touched me now, and my body practically vibrated with need.

“Hmm.” Preston tugged on my tie, a playful tilt to his lips. “If we had more time, this could be fun…”

I flashed to an image of him sprawled out on my bed, my tie around his wrists, and I reached up to grip his hand.

“Take it off,” I said, my voice coming out in an impatient growl. Even paying someone off wouldn’t give us more than a handful of minutes, and I wanted him to get what he came for.

And maybe I had other, more selfish, reasons, too.

“I like it when you tell me what to do,” Preston said, making quick work of undoing my tie and flicking open the final button at my throat. With my shirt now completely open, he dropped his gaze down my body, letting his fingers follow his eyes.

I knew he could feel the way I trembled at his touch, but fuck, I wanted it. I needed him to explore me any damn way he wanted to. But Preston seemed to have more self-control than I did at the moment, because he only lightly skimmed my chest and stomach with his fingertips.

When I cursed, he smiled, raising a brow as he said, “What was that you told me I needed the other day? Patience?” He moved his fingertips back up my chest, excruciatingly slowly. “Well, consider this me taking your advice.”

Goddammit, I *had* said that, and even though part of me now wanted to kick myself for it, I couldn’t deny how much I liked that he remembered, and was using my words against me to tease the hell out of my cock.

“Nothing here,” he said, giving my chest another once-over. Then he slid his hands under my shirt and pushed it off my shoulders. As it fell down my arms, Preston locked on to the tattoo he’d been searching for, and his smile grew. “Bingo.”

“Satisfied now?”

Instead of answering, he ran his fingers over the black and grey ink that I’d gotten a decade ago. The custom designed tattoo was of a fierce medieval dragon, its spiked tail wrapped around my arm. Preston lowered his head and looked up at me from under his lashes as he brushed his lips across my inked bicep. It was so unexpected, so deliciously sexy, that I inhaled sharply—and he repeated the move, adding his tongue.

I reached for the back of his head, twisting my fingers through his hair with enough pressure to draw his mouth off me.

“We don’t have time for all that,” I said.

“Maybe not now.” I could almost taste the champagne on his breath and had to hold myself back from diving in. “But we could have all the time in the world later.”

“Oh? There something you want, Preston?”

“I want you to invite me over.” The hand on my bicep gripped a little tighter, and he leaned in like he was going to kiss me.

But if this was all just one big tease, I wasn’t giving in so easily. I dodged his mouth, moving to the side of his neck and grazing the smooth skin under his ear with my nose. Fuck, he smelled good—and when he arched his head to give me better access, I felt my self-control begin to slip.

I could take him now. Right here. Do anything I wanted to him, and he’d beg me for more. Fuck whoever was out there waiting for us. All that existed in this moment was the two of us—

No. I’d already pushed things too far by inviting him to join me somewhere far too public.

But later…

The words were out of my mouth without another thought. “Meet me at my place after dinner.”

Surprise flashed in Preston’s eyes. “Really?”

“Have you changed your mind?”

“Fuck no.” He shook his head, a smile spreading across those lips I was desperate to taste. “I’ll be there. Wherever you want me.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

A quick rap on the door served as a warning that our time together was over. Preston took a step back and looked me over again with unquenched thirst. I could only imagine what I looked like. The cuffs of my shirt around my wrists were the only things that kept it from hitting the floor, my tie dangled loosely around my neck, and Preston’s kiss still lingered on my tattoo.

The fact that no one outside these doors knew what we were doing in here made the whole thing even more intoxicating, but I knew it would be nothing compared to what would happen when I got him alone and finally gave in.

As I pulled my shirt back on and began to put myself back together, Preston glanced at himself in the mirror and smoothed down the back of his hair where my hands had been.

“Enjoy your dinner, Mr. Carrington. Be sure to leave room for dessert.” He winked at me in the mirror and then slipped out the door, leaving me and my aching cock alone…until later.

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THIRTEEN

archer

SITTING THROUGH THE rest of that dinner almost killed me. I would've made my excuses and left if Preston had done the same, but he'd been forced to finish the meal with his parents and their guests, and I'd had a front-row seat.

I hadn't let myself think too deeply about what my invitation meant, because I was past second-guessing what I was feeling. Benoit had been right about one thing—no one had to know. It was clear Preston and I were on the same page about what we wanted, and I'd be damned if I held myself back out of fear.

The second I was through my front door, I tore off my scarf and trench coat, hanging them on the rack more haphazardly than I normally would. Preston's table had been wrapping things up when I left, and I didn't think he'd be too far behind. There was no doubt in my mind that he'd be coming tonight—not only to my house, but also, if I had my way, all over himself or me, depending on how I could have him.

My cock was so hard with the need for release that I was tempted to rub one out to take the edge off. Instead, I forced a breath in through my nose, wondering when I'd reverted to a teenager with no self-restraint.

And here I'd been the one telling Preston to have patience. What a hypocrite.

I glanced at my phone to check the time, noticing there weren't any text messages or missed calls.

We were still on. Whenever that would be.

God, with the tease in the men's room earlier, I wasn't sure I'd last long enough to get him up to my room once he got here. But I didn't have any condoms or lube down here.

I cursed and headed up the stairs, which wasn't an easy feat with my hard-on tenting my pants and causing them to stretch across my hips painfully. After grabbing a handful of what I needed just in case my impatience took over, I made my way back down and hid the items in a drawer by the entrance. I didn't know why I bothered doing that when it was clear what I'd invited Preston over for.

I glanced out the window and cursed at the empty street before heading into the kitchen to pour myself a glass of wine. Something red. Bold yet smooth. I uncorked a bottle and reached for a glass before deciding, *fuck it*. Why bother?

Anticipation hummed through my veins as I lifted the bottle to my lips, wondering who the hell I'd turned into over the last week. Someone who couldn't stop thinking about a guy half my age, a guy who'd always been completely off-limits, but now I couldn't stop imagining my hands all over him.

A couple of long swallows later and the warmth of the wine heating my skin had me tearing at my tie, freeing the knot quickly and then unbuttoning the collar. It felt like I could suddenly breathe again—until the sound of my doorbell chimed through the empty house.

Instantly my pulse kicked up.

I set the bottle aside and then pulled the tie from around my neck, tossing it on the counter as I headed for the door. Need rode me hard, and I felt like I couldn't get to the man on the other side of the wall fast enough. I should've just kept the door open for him—one less step to make me wait.

Again, I wondered if I'd lost my fucking mind. With my hand on the knob, I closed my eyes and forced myself to calm down so this wasn't over before it started.

But when I opened the door and saw Preston standing there one moment and pushing past me the next, all thought of taking things slow flew out the window.

He was barely inside when I kicked the door shut and then backed him up against it. A soft grunt left him as his back hit the solid wood, and the restless hunger flashing in his eyes told me he was as on edge as I was.

There was one thing I wanted, though, before this got completely out of hand.

I took his chin between my thumb and forefinger and raised that gorgeous face a fraction, and when I leaned in and slid my tongue over his upper lip, Preston trembled and reached for my lapels.

“That night of the charity event, you took me off guard,” I whispered, nipping at his lower lip. “Not tonight, though. Give me your mouth. I want to taste you.”

Preston craned forward, crushing his lips up against mine. The order was one he was more than willing to obey as he parted his lips and let me inside.

I thrust my greedy tongue into the sweet recess of his mouth as he pulled me tight against him, and then I explored every inch of him the way I’d imagined doing since that night.

Preston groaned, tightening his hands around my jacket as he began to shove it off my shoulders. I shifted to help with the effort, and when it hit the floor, I reached for his and did the same.

There. One layer gone and only about a million more to go.

“Take off your shirt,” Preston said hoarsely as he leaned back against the door, his hair ruffled, his lips swollen.

It seemed I wasn’t the only one wishing our clothes away.

I unbuttoned my cuffs and pulled my shirt from my pants, then quickly unbuttoned the rest.

“Damn.” Preston reached down and palmed his thick length as I shrugged out of the shirt and tossed it to the floor. “I could come just from looking at you like that.”

“I know,” I said as I unbuttoned my pants. “You did that the other night.”

An unapologetic smirk hit his lips as his gaze roamed down to what my hands were doing.

“Want me to apologize?” Preston reached for his own zipper. “I could get down on my knees? Or whatever you want.”

“Yes, I seem to remember that offer.” I kicked my shoes and pants aside and got immense satisfaction over the way Preston’s busy hands faltered as I straightened in my black boxer briefs. “But I don’t want you on your knees just yet.”

I walked back to him and reached for his frozen hands. I batted them away, finished unzipping his pants, and shoved them down his hips.

“For now, I want your sweet ass, and that requires you turning around and facing the door.”

Preston’s eyes widened a fraction, and it felt good to finally catch him off guard. If he thought he’d be dealing with polite Mr. Carrington tonight, then he was in for one hell of a wake-up call.

He’d teased, flaunted himself, done everything in his power to get my attention—and now he fucking had it.

As the surprise melted into pleasure, Preston’s eyes darkened. “Yes, sir.”

He kicked aside his pants and turned until he was facing the door, and I took a second to just study him.

He was in just a pair of socks and his white dress shirt, the tail ends of it covering what I knew would be a spectacular ass, and because I was apparently a glutton for punishment, I heard myself say, “Lift your shirt.”

Preston reached down and raised it to his waist, and when a pair of tight navy briefs came into view, I was on him quicker than my next breath. I plastered my front to his back, bracing my hands on the door, and when my stiff cock bumped up against the fabric, a low curse left him. I lowered my head until my lips were grazing the line of his neck, and he shivered.

“Tell me you’ve done this before.”

He reached back for my hip and ground onto me. “You’re asking if my ass is a virgin? Now?”

Avoiding my question wasn’t going to get me inside him any faster, and I slid my covered cock between his cheeks, eliciting a groan. “Answer me.”

“I want it hard, fast, and deep—does that answer your question?”

A smirk crossed my lips at the smartassed answer, and I pushed off the door, moving back so I could grab the lube and condom I’d placed in the drawer nearby. Thank fuck I’d had the sense to grab them, because I’d been right—I was unable to wait to get him upstairs.

He grumbled a complaint as he looked over his shoulder, but when he saw what was in my hands, he bit back a smile and turned to face the door like the good boy he was.

I pushed my briefs down enough to free my erection, then rolled on the condom and lubed it up so I was nice and slick. It was no time for going slow, not with the way Preston shifted restlessly, practically clawing the door.

“Get inside me.”

His begging was music to my ears. He was as desperate as I was, all the teasing and foreplay bringing us to this moment.

I hooked a finger in the waistband of his briefs, pulled it back, and then let it snap against his skin—a warning that he wasn’t the one in charge right now.

Preston stilled, following my silent order, and damn, that was hotter than it should’ve been. I shoved his briefs beneath his plump ass, and the moment all that smooth skin came into view, my mouth watered. I wanted to lick, bite, suck, tease, and torment—but most of all, I wanted to fuck.

Spreading his cheeks apart, I guided my dick along the crack of his ass, getting him nice and wet for me. Every time I passed his hot hole, I heard him suck in a breath, but he kept still like I’d told him. It wasn’t until the head of my cock nudged at his entrance that he couldn’t stop himself from arching his back to force me past that tight ring of muscle.

The shock of entering him on his terms made me hiss out a breath, and I slapped my hand against the door to regain leverage.

Holy…shit. Preston may not be a virgin, but his ass choked my dick like he was one.

I cursed, dropping my forehead onto his shoulder as I gripped his hip and inched my way inside him. I’d wanted this hard and fast, but now I was worried I wouldn’t make it to balls deep.

That should’ve told me I was in over my head with him.

“More,” he said on a gasp, pushing back on me again.

As if I could deny him anything.

I grabbed the other side of his hip, and with one quick thrust, I was deep inside Preston Abernathy.

And then…it was on.

I dug my fingers into his supple skin, and the unadulterated pleasure was almost enough to bring me to my knees, but I’d be damned if I went down now—at least not that way.

Preston braced his palms against the door, and as I began to pull out of him, he shoved back, chasing me.

Jesus. He was so damn eager, so greedy for my cock, and his response made me just as voracious. I thrust forward until I was flush against him, then lowered my head to drag my tongue up his neck.

“You make me feel like I could fuck all night.”

“Good,” he panted, turning his head my way. “’Cause once was never gonna be enough with you.”

I stole his lips in a ravenous kiss, spearing my tongue inside his mouth as I plowed inside his body. Any decorum I’d possessed was long gone as arousal and lust overrode any and all thought.

I flattened my hands on Preston’s hips and smoothed them along the tight, unblemished skin that came with youth. The need to see him naked and sprawled out for me at some point tonight became a promise I made to myself.

“Beautiful.” My voice was gruff as I ran my palms up his torso under the white dress shirt he still wore. “You’re so beautiful, and so fucking responsive.”

Preston groaned and arched back into me, raising an arm so he could grip the back of my neck.

“With you…” His warm breath ghosted over me. “Only like this with you.”

I circled his nipples with my fingers and pinched, making him cry out. “Good, because you’re my boy now.” God, I was insane for making that claim, but that was how I felt. That was what I wanted. “And tonight, you come for me.”

“Yes. Yours. For as long as you want.”

And what a dangerous notion that was. But I wasn’t going to think about that right now.

I swept a hand over the hard ridges of his abs, then gripped the root of his dick. Preston gasped, clenching his ass around me in a way that made my toes curl. As I began to move behind him, he dug his fingers into my neck and his head fell back on my shoulder.

I made sharp, shallow digs as I rutted up against him like an animal in heat. I wanted to imprint myself on him in ways I’d never imagined so he’d remember this—me—for years to come.

As I worked his cock, I lowered my head and scraped my teeth along his neck, nosing aside the collar of his shirt. He twisted his fingers in the back of my hair, pulling me closer, and that was all the permission I needed. I sank my teeth into the soft skin at the crook of his neck, and as I worked his pulsing length, I began to suck and fuck him like it was the last night on earth.

Preston gripped my thigh as I continued to rail him, and he took every inch I gave, jutting his cock through my fist.

"Archer…" he moaned, riding the high right to the edge.

I raised my head and brought my lips back to his ear. "That's it, let me hear how much you love my cock."

"So damn much."

His ragged pants as I moved in and out of him were a testament to that, as was the way his arousal was coating my hand.

"Then come for me, you gorgeous fucker. Fall apart right here, right now."

Preston cried out, frantically thrusting through my fist as I plowed into him again. My name tumbled off his tongue as he tensed against me, and seconds later he was painting my front door with a spray of cum.

Fuck, I'd never felt so alive. Primal and wild. It was reckless and completely unhinged in every way, and watching his cum drip down to the hardwood floor had my own climax exploding inside of him. My control was nowhere to be found.

I took him like a fucking madman right there in my parlor entryway.

Did I feel guilty? No.

Was I sorry? No.

Did I want to get him upstairs and do this all over again, but this time have him come down my throat? Abso-fucking-lutely.

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FOURTEEN

preston

“YOU KNOW, I’VE always wondered what your bedroom would look like. I’d lie downstairs and imagine you up here…”

I stopped on the threshold just outside of Archer’s room, leaning against the doorframe and watching him climb the last few stairs, surprised we’d been able to walk up them at all after our initial coming together.

I still couldn’t believe what had happened down by his front door, and was almost tempted to ask him to leave the mess I’d made as proof. But I supposed it was better to be safe than sorry in the case of discovery, and you never knew who might stop by Archer’s place unannounced.

Work colleagues.

Elysium members.

His *daughter*.

So it was probably for the best he’d taken a moment to clean up. It also hadn’t hurt that I got to sit on the stairs and watch him, because Archer in a pair of black briefs and nothing else was something I could watch for hours, whether he was bent over cleaning the hardwood floor or climbing the last few stairs toward me.

“I probably should be mortified by a comment like that, but…” Archer stopped opposite me, his eyes falling to the open collar of my shirt where I had no doubt that a mark was already forming. “I’ve definitely spent several nights in here thinking about you too.”

That admission, and the arrogant smirk that followed, made my dick stiffen where I’d stuffed it back in my briefs. Archer was so goddamn sexy,

and the idea that he'd been lying in his bed fantasizing about me had me ready to go all over again.

I pushed off the frame and placed my palms on his bare chest, loving the smattering of hair there, as I nipped along the stubble covering his chin.

"What did you think about?"

Archer wrapped an arm around my waist and pulled me flush against his body. His own cock showed renewed interest, throbbing against me.

"You, that night in my sitting room. The way you watched me, and how…hungry you seemed for me."

"Not seemed. *Am*." I scraped my teeth up his jaw line and a growl left him. "So damn hungry."

Archer reached for the handle of his bedroom door and shoved it open.

"Good, because I feel fucking *ravenous* tonight." He swatted my ass and urged me inside. "Get naked, Preston."

He didn't have to tell me twice.

I walked through the door and unbuttoned my shirt, scanning the enormous room that was a mix of shadows and light from the buildings outside. I took in the rich, masculine feel of the décor, from the mahogany bureau and men's valet stand to the leather chair and lamp by the window.

There was a plush rug under the king-sized bed in the middle of the room, and at the end of it was a wooden chest with a throw over it. The room spoke of taste and sophistication, and fit the man behind me to perfection.

"Stop right there."

My toes curled into the rug as I glanced over my shoulder to see Archer shutting the door and walking across the hardwood to the lamp in the corner, which he flicked on.

The soft glow lit up the space in a way that was both cozy and intimate. But the best part was the way it illuminated Archer's body. I could see almost every naked inch of him except what his boxer briefs covered, and he was letting me take my time, unlike the quick glimpse I'd gotten downstairs. He was so breathtaking that I couldn't decide what part of him was the sexiest. Maybe those strong, muscular thighs? Or the V of his hips that led down to an impressive cock I was dying to get a closer look at, especially now that I'd felt it inside me.

"I want to see all of you," I said.

Archer didn’t hesitate. He pushed his briefs down off his body and kicked them aside, giving me what I wanted.

My mouth went dry as he reached down to grip the base of his dick. It hardened as he held it out for me, giving it a couple of slow strokes.

Archer was beautiful. Every single, glorious inch of him. The desire to explore him with my mouth overwhelmed me, but when I started forward, Archer shook his head.

“Uh uh. Don’t move.”

I went still, and he grinned playfully.

He kept his eyes on me as he took a seat in a nearby chair, and I reached between my legs and palmed my hard-on.

God, he was so hot, sitting there like some kind of king on his throne. I was ready to get down on my knees and worship him.

He nodded toward me and gestured at my shirt. “Take it off.”

Oh, *shit*, he wanted me to *strip* for him. I had no problem with that. Hell, I’d done it once before. At least this time I would remember it.

I undid the last few buttons remaining, and when my shirt hung from my shoulders, I shrugged out of it, leaving me in nothing but my briefs and socks. About to remove them next, I went to bend over, but Archer shook his head and circled his finger in the air.

“Turn around and do that.”

My dick jerked against the fabric of my briefs. That he wanted to look at my ass made me want to give him a show he’d never forget.

I pivoted until I was facing the chest and huge bed, then bent down to remove my socks. There was a gruff sound from behind and I looked back to Archer. He’d widened his straddle and was rubbing his hand up and down his thick length.

I had one last piece of clothing to remove, and, wanting to give the maximum effect, I remained bent at the waist as I slipped my thumbs into my briefs and pulled them down over my ass.

“Fuck, Preston.” Archer’s voice was rough like gravel as the scrap of material fell to my ankles. “Come here.”

My legs trembled as I turned back to face him, and the sight of Archer watching me, dick in hand, was a fantasy come to life.

I licked my lips and crossed the room to him, and then he looked to the bureau beside him and said, “Top drawer.”

“Wait, does Mr. Carrington have a sex drawer?”

“As of this week, he does.”

Oh hell, that confession just about brought me to my knees. I pulled open the drawer quicker than I could take my next breath.

“You bought all this for me?” I peered inside at the lube, condoms, and assortment of sex toys and then back at the man stroking his cock.

Archer smirked. “You look like a kid in a candy store.”

“Yeah, well, I know exactly what I want to suck.”

“Dirty boy.”

“Only on Tuesdays and Thursdays.”

“Then what was your excuse Monday night?”

He had me there, but— “Have you seen what you look like? That’s all the excuse I need.”

“Preston?”

“Yeah?”

“Get over here, now.”

I set the bottle of lube on the side table next to Archer and held the condom out.

Archer spread his legs further apart and pointed his cock upright. “Put it on.”

Try to fucking stop me.

I tore the packet open with my teeth, surprised my hands weren’t shaking with the need coursing through me. Somehow I managed to roll it on without embarrassing myself.

Even though he’d just been inside me only minutes ago, my body heated like this was the first time we’d done this. At least it was fully naked. It wasn’t a quickie against the door; he could see all of me, and I couldn’t keep my eyes off him.

“I want you to ride me.”

The way my dick responded by noticeably pulsing was answer enough that I was dying to do just that. Even though I had a feeling I knew what his answer would be, I still wanted to tease a little…

“Did you want me like this?” I asked, turning my back on him so he could get a prime view of my ass. “Or like this?” I faced forward to see Archer’s eyes were glittering dangerously.

A wave of anticipation rolled through me as he licked his lips and crooked his finger.

“I want you just like that. Facing me.”

Fucking swoon. Jesus, that was sexy. Even sexier when he popped the top of the lube and began to coat his dick.

The high-back chair was wide enough that I could put my knees on either side of him. As I climbed on top, he set the lube aside and grabbed two handfuls of my ass. Then he lowered his head and flicked his tongue along my slit. The move was unexpected, and I cursed and reached for the chair so I wouldn't lose my balance.

I shouldn't have worried about falling, though, because Archer's fingers tightened, holding me steady as he teased my crown.

"You're not allowed to come," he said, the vibration from his lips making my cock jerk. He looked up at me under dark lashes. "Unless it's down my throat."

That order might've been his hottest one yet, and I bit back a smile. "Yes, sir."

"Good boy." He straightened and reached down to hold his thick erection steady for me. "Now sit on my dick."

I spread my cheeks apart and lowered onto him slowly. The cords of his neck strained as he entered me, and I was thankful I was already good and stretched from his taking me downstairs.

"You're fucking incredible," I said, moving my hands to his chest as he continued to fill me. Being face to face and tangled up in each other made this feel so much more intimate. I could see every flicker of ecstasy cross his gorgeous features. I could feel the way his muscles tightened under my palms. This position was dangerous, because something told me that after this, I'd never want to let him go.

Archer took hold of my hips and brought me down the final couple inches, settling me fully onto his lap.

A curse of pleasure escaped me as I kneaded my fingers into his muscles. "How does it feel like there's even more of you?"

"This angle is…" His words trailed off as I lifted off him to the tip and then took him again all the way to the hilt. "Shit."

He closed his eyes and flexed his fingers on my hips. When his eyes opened again, the lust I saw there matched my own. I'd never imagined a time when Archer Carrington would be as insatiable for me as I was for him, but this was real, it was happening, and the power that made me feel was all-consuming. I wanted to be the best fuck he'd ever had.

I began to ride him the way I'd only ever dreamed about—sliding up and down his rock-hard length and then grinding down on him so he brushed up against that sweet spot deep inside. Every time he hit it and I moaned, Archer bit down on his lip, like the sound I made would cause him to spontaneously combust.

The thought was sexier than it should've been, spurring me on to take everything from him. He let me set the pace, though I had no doubt he was just topping from the bottom, letting me believe I was the one in charge. That was fine by me. There was nothing this man could do that I wouldn't want completely.

Without thinking, I reached between us to grip my aching cock, but Archer was faster, moving my hand back up to his chest.

His gaze smoldered. "What did I say?"

"You said I couldn't come unless it's down your throat." I clenched my ass around his dick, and he sucked in a breath. "But you didn't say I couldn't touch."

"New rule, then." He leaned in, ghosting his lips over mine. "No touching allowed. I want you begging for my mouth."

"I'll beg for you whenever you want me to."

A slow, sexy smile spread across Archer's lips. "What a very, very good boy you are, Preston."

He captured my mouth in a dizzying kiss, wrapping his arms around me to hold me close. I swept my tongue inside, exploring and tasting, like I'd never get a chance to again.

But I wasn't going to think like that. Not when he thrust his hips up into me, setting my body on fire. It was all I could do to thread my fingers through his hair and hold on tight.

I was breathless when I pulled away, our bodies sticky between us from my pre-cum.

"I hope you never look at this chair the same way," I said.

"There's several areas of my house that you've marked now, including this chair."

I didn't bother hiding my smile. "Is that a bad thing?"

"It's probably not a good thing. Like this bruise." He ran his thumb along the crease of my neck where his mouth had been earlier. "Ask me if I care."

I didn’t need to ask. I just needed him to come inside me as much as I needed to feel his lips wrapped around my cock.

Slamming back down onto Archer’s dick, I began to pick up the pace, memorizing the little noises that escaped from him as he got closer to coming. With his skin flushed under the low light, I’d never seen anyone as beautiful as Archer. He was a sight to behold as he fell apart beneath me and inside me, shouting my name like a curse and a prayer.

I rode him through it, ignoring the need coursing through me to come with him. If I wasn’t actively trying to hold myself back like he’d told me to, I had a feeling there’d be an even bigger mess between us.

As his movements began to slow and he came down from his high, Archer grabbed the back of my neck, pulling me in for a quick kiss. “Fuck my mouth. Now.”

His words sent another blast of desire through my throbbing dick. I lifted myself up off him carefully, my legs a little shaky as I stood and waited for him to remove and tie off his condom.

Without asking where he wanted me, or allowing him to get up, I stepped up onto the chair, one foot on the cushion by his leg, propping the other on the arm. I grabbed the top of the high-back with one hand to steady myself, and with the other, the root of my cock.

Archer’s head was at the perfect angle, his mouth so close it practically kissed the head of my dick. I hoped he was hungry.

A feral sound reverberated out of him as he parted his lips and took me all the way to the back of his throat in one quick move that caught me off guard. There was nothing tentative about the way he consumed me. His mouth was voracious, his tongue smooth velvet against my sensitive skin, and his sucking skills—it was a miracle I hadn’t already blown my load.

Looking down, I watched my dick disappear again and again as Archer held me close. He’d moved his hand between my legs to my ass, keeping me right where he wanted me so he could get his fill. The sight was so erotic that I couldn’t stop rocking my hips, stealing even more of him.

He pulled off me, his lips glistening. “That’s it. Use my mouth and let me taste every drop.”

If it hadn’t been for the death grip I had on the back of the chair and the way his strong arm held me, I was sure my legs would’ve given out.

But if Archer wanted me to use him to get off, I wasn’t backing down from that challenge.

I adjusted my foot on the arm of the chair, widening my stance, and then I guided my dick back into his mouth. He sucked on the head, swirling his tongue around, and when I was ready, I put both hands back on the top of the chair and did what he told me.

I fucked his mouth.

Using the chair as leverage, I forced him to take me again and again, until my movements became jerky and out of rhythm and I knew I wouldn't be able to hold myself back any longer.

"Archer," I said on a gasp, his name the only warning he got before my climax hurtled through me like a roaring tidal wave. I exploded into the heat of his mouth, and with every swallow, he milked my cock dry.

I waited as long as I could before collapsing into his lap. My head fell forward onto his shoulder as I waited for my vision to come back and my breathing to even out.

Tonight had already been bigger and better than my wildest dreams—and if the way Archer flirted with the crease of my ass was any indication, it wasn't over yet.

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FIFTEEN

archer

WHEN MY ALARM went off the next morning, I woke up to find I couldn't move my left arm. It was completely numb, but I wasn't going to complain, not when the source of why was still fast asleep up against me, his head on my bicep.

The alarm didn't even wake him, evidence of the long hours we'd spent wrapped up in each other, and I reached as far as I could with my free hand to snooze the noise. The slight movement did have Preston stirring, and when he turned on his side, he slid one of his arms low across my stomach. A few more inches down and he would've felt how hard I'd woken up. I should've been completely satiated after last night, but looking at him now had hunger igniting inside me all over again.

His body was absolutely unreal. Had I looked that good at his age? All those long, lean muscles and a stamina that had knocked me on my ass. I was feeling it this morning, but it'd been worth it. And, truth be told, I could definitely be up for another round before work—

That train of thought stopped in its tracks, because Preston wouldn't be going to work this morning.

He'd be going to school.

A low laugh rumbled out of me involuntarily, because it was such a ridiculous thought that I couldn't even believe it was the truth. The vibration of my chest made Preston's eyes open. Those long, dark lashes flickered slowly as he woke up.

"Archer?" he mumbled, looking up at me.

I tried to stop laughing, really I did, but this whole situation was so crazy in the light of day that I couldn't help myself.

He propped himself up on his elbow, a deep frown etched between his brows. "What's so funny?"

With his weight off my left arm, it began to prickle and blood flowed back into it.

"Was I talking in my sleep or something?" he said, and then wiped at his mouth. "Drooling? What?"

I shook my head, my chuckles settling as I reached up to grip his chin and pull him down to me. Those full lips were still slightly swollen and utterly fucking delicious as I greeted him with a good-morning kiss that had my cock tenting the sheets. The kiss was slow, sensual, and so sexy that when he moaned into my mouth, I knew things would get out of hand real fast if I let them.

I drew back and dropped my hand. "Good morning."

Hovering over me with the morning sun streaming across his bare chest, I didn't think it was right for anyone to look so damn good. His hair fell over his forehead in a way it never did, but then, I'd had my hands in it for hours. Preston looked well used in the best way, and *God* I wished I'd woken up half an hour ago so I could start the morning off the way my dick so badly wanted to.

Though I certainly wasn't the only horny one in the bed, because Preston's wandering hand traced down my stomach to where the sheet covered my hips.

I halted him by grabbing his wrist.

"What?" he said, feigning innocence I knew by now he did *not* possess. "You said good morning. I figured I could make it *great*."

I cursed, dropping my head back on my pillow. The offer was too tempting to say no to, and I would've given in in a heartbeat if my alarm hadn't chosen that moment to go off again.

"Dammit." I hit the button again as Preston raised a brow.

"Have somewhere you need to be?" He tried again to move his hand down past the sheet, but I held on to him tighter.

"As a matter of fact, we both do." In one quick move, I had Preston on his back, straddling his thighs. I held him down, cuffing his wrists on the mattress with my hands, and then nipped at his mouth. "It's not the

weekend yet, which means I have to go to work. And you”—I sucked his lower lip into my mouth and released it with a pop—“have to go to school.”

That—that right there was why I’d been laughing, and when the words left my mouth again, I grinned. Preston narrowed his eyes.

“Oh, I see. You’re making fun of me.”

“Not at all, but I *am* concerned you might miss the bus.”

A mischievous spark entered his eyes. “Wow, okay. Well, be careful when you climb off me, old man. Wouldn’t want you to break a hip.”

My lips twitched as I tightened my thighs at his waist. “Old man, huh?”

“I mean, if you feel like proving me wrong, go for it. But I thought you had to go to work. Boring…”

The disaffected tone of his voice, plus the rolling of his eyes, made Preston come off as a petulant, spoiled brat—the complete opposite of what he truly was, but his little act made me want to roll him over and spank his ass.

I was tempted, *so* very tempted to skip my morning meeting, but…

“As much as I’d love to teach you a lesson, I’m going to leave that to your teachers this morning, since I have a meeting I need to get to.”

“A meeting? This early?” Preston glanced at the clock on the nightstand. “You do know you *own* the company, right? That gives you the power to pick a civilized time to schedule a meeting.”

I chuckled and brushed my lips over the top of his. “Something I might’ve done had I known I’d be waking up with you in my bed this morning.”

“Hmm.” Preston purred as he stretched beneath me. “And it’s such a nice, big, cozy bed. I could always wait for you here, naked and hard, until you’ve finished your meeting.”

Sweet Jesus.

I wasn’t sure I’d be able to make it through the damn meeting if he did that. It was going to be hard enough to concentrate with the memory of what we’d done still fresh in my head. But to know he was back here waiting for me? No, there was no way I’d be able to focus.

“I don’t think so.” I released his wrists and climbed off him, and when I got to my feet and pressed an automatic hand to an old back injury, a low chuckle came from the bed.

“Ah, so it’s not a hip issue but the back.” He winked at me, the smart-ass little shit. “I’ll remember that next time and be sure to take it easy on

you.”

I ran my eyes down over him, naked and flat on his back with the sheets thrown to the side, his thickened length resting heavy across his body.

“And I’ll remember your smart mouth and be sure not to.”

Preston wrapped his hand around himself and licked his lower lip. “Promise?”

“Fucking hell.” I rubbed my palm over my erection and shook my head. “You always seemed like such a polite young man—”

He parted his legs and put his feet flat on my mattress. “Surprise.”

No shit. He was one surprise after another.

Single. Not in a relationship.

Gay. Not straight.

Naughty as fuck. Not a good boy at all.

But he was *my* boy for now, and there was no way he was going to come again until I did.

“You have exactly two minutes to get your sweet ass out of my bed, or you won’t see it again until—”

Preston was up and off the mattress before I could even finish my sentence, and knowing how much he wanted a repeat did nothing to quench the lust coursing through me. Neither did the purple bruise I’d left low on his neck.

“That was quick.”

Preston’s lips quirked. “Lucky for me, I’m young and spritely.”

I took a step forward and wrapped my hand around his hard-on, then leaned in to say by his ear, “Lucky for *me*, don’t you mean?”

Preston groaned as I gave him a firm pull, then I let him go and moved away. If I didn’t get some distance between us, and soon, neither of us were going to leave this room.

As I walked to my closet to pick out my suit for the day, I spotted his pants on the floor. I reached down to pick them up, before turning to see him doing the same with the rest of his clothes.

Shit. They were crumpled to hell. There was no way he could go to school in them. Plus, they weren’t exactly school attire.

“If you’d like to use my shower, I could—” What? Give him a suit to wear? That wasn’t exactly Astor attire either. Unless you were one of the parents or teachers.

“No, I’m good. I smell like you. And that’s fucking hot.”

Yes, it was. As he pulled his underwear on, I had to bite back my disappointment, though the visual of him in nothing but those navy briefs was fantasy inspiring all on its own.

“I’m just going to head home for a change of clothes.”

“Won’t you be late?”

“Scotty is good at getting us places fast, and if worse comes to worst, I’m good at getting out of trouble when I need to.”

“Is that right?”

He shrugged, casual as you please as he pulled on his white dress shirt. “A while ago I was in trouble with you, and look at me now.”

Cocky shit.

I tossed him his pants, unable to stop my smirk. “Help yourself to something to eat. I’ll be down in a few.”

“Showering?”

I ran my eyes over him and at the last moment decided, “No. You’re right. Smelling you on me *is* fucking hot.”

Preston groaned and bit into his lower lip. The craving in his eyes made me take a step back.

“Go downstairs, Preston.”

He pulled on his pants and rounded the bed. “Yes, sir.”

I watched him go, because who wouldn’t? Preston’s backside was as appealing as his front.

I took that image of him with me into the closet and got busy picking out a suit. Once I was dressed and ready for the day, I grabbed my watch and wallet from the bureau and headed downstairs.

The aromatic scent of ground coffee beans greeted me as I made my way into the kitchen. When I spotted two traveler’s mugs at the end of the counter, I smiled.

We seemed to be making a habit of this, morning coffee in my kitchen. Not that that was unusual. For years now Preston had made himself at home in this house with Serena. Hell, I’d eaten breakfast with him right here in this very space. What *was* unusual was that the last two times he’d been here was because he’d spent the night with me.

Me. A man. Not only that, a man twice his age who was friends with his parents, and president of the social club that all of his inner circle was a part of—including my daughter.

It was complicated as hell.

A secret that could ruin us both.

But there wasn't one single part of me that regretted it.

"I don't know what's better. You in a suit or you naked." Preston walked up beside me and smoothed a hand down my back. "Both make me hard as a rock."

Preston had clearly combed wet fingers through his hair in an effort to get it more presentable. He'd tucked his shirt into his pants, and while it was still wrinkled, he looked much more put together than he had leaving my bedroom.

"You're good for my ego."

"And you're good for my dick." He stepped into my side and rocked his erection up against me. "See. It likes you. A lot."

My eyes dropped to his lips, and the horny little flirt licked them.

"Don't start that again."

"Start what?"

I chuckled and reached for the mug. "You know exactly what. I've got to go."

Preston held up his palms. "I'm not stopping you."

No, he wasn't, but my willpower was quickly fading. The fact I was even *thinking* about calling up and canceling my meeting was a testament to his power over me—something I was starting to suspect he knew.

"You're fucking trouble."

Preston waggled his brows. "Tell me you don't like it."

I opened my mouth about to tell him I liked it too damn much when my doorbell chimed loudly through the house.

Preston scoffed. "Saved by the bell?"

"One thing I can say about Benoit—he has impeccable timing."

"Your meeting's here?"

The slight panic on Preston's face had my lips twitching. *Not so bold now, are we?* "No, we're heading across town to meet a new client."

"Oh, okay. So should I wait until you're gone before—"

I reached for his chin. "Only if you want to. But Benoit knows."

"He does?"

"I needed someone to confess my"—I brushed my lips over his—"*desires* to."

"Oh fuck." Preston sighed and melted into me. "I wanna hear them."

I nipped at his lower lip then let him go. “I’m sure you do. But right now, you need to get going, and so do I.”

The doorbell chimed again as a text lit up my phone on the counter.

“What is it with impatient people ringing my doorbell this week?”

Preston shrugged, but smiled playfully as he took a sip of his coffee and we headed out of the kitchen. When we reached the foyer, I took Preston’s coat from the rack and tossed it to him.

“I don’t think I’ll ever be able to stand here again without getting a hard-on.”

I chuckled as I shrugged into mine. “Then maybe put your coat on *after* we leave. The last thing I need is Benoit eyeing what’s mine.”

I unlocked and opened the door to greet my friend.

“Good morning, Benny. Sorry to keep you waiting.”

Benoit turned on my porch, his Burberry winter cape flowing around his body with extra flair as his eyes narrowed on me.

“Well, it’s about ti—” Benoit’s words stopped forming as his eyes shifted past my shoulder to Preston. Then his knowing gaze came back to mine and his glossy lips slid into a sly smirk. “Good morning, indeed.”

I barely resisted the urge to roll my eyes as I stepped aside and held the door open for Preston.

“Benoit, you remember Preston.”

Preston stepped up beside me, and Benoit’s eyes roved down over him. He never could resist a beautiful man.

“Do I ever. Morning, *mon cher*.”

“Morning. It’s nice to see you again.”

“Not nearly as nice as it is to see *you*.”

“Okay, that’s enough of that.” I stepped out onto the porch and grabbed my friend’s elbow.

“What? It is nice to see him.” Benoit batted his lashes at me. “Bet he’s even nicer to wake up to.”

“Benny,” I warned, but even I could tell it was halfhearted as Benoit turned back to a grinning Preston.

“He’s so grumpy. Did I interrupt you two, or did his back—”

“Have a good day, Preston,” I said, and practically dragged Benoit down the stairs to where a car was waiting for us.

“Yes, have a good day, Preston,” Benoit called out as Preston’s laughter followed us, and I shoved my friend in the arm.

“Are you insane?” I said. The driver pulled open the door for Benoit as I marched around to my side and glared at him over the roof.

“No, *mon ami*. I’m jealous as hell. So get your ass in the car—I want all the dirty details, and don’t act like there aren’t any. That boy is lucky he has any clothes to wear home today. Animal.”

Benoit’s laughter floated into the cool morning air as he ducked into the car. My eyes drifted back up to my porch to see Preston standing there staring down at me with his phone in hand.

A second later, a text came through.

PRESTON:

Have a good day, Mr. Carrington. Just know that me and my mouth could’ve made it GREAT ;)

My dick jerked as I imagined exactly what he’d written and—

Shit, if anyone ever saw that, and who it was from… I needed to change his name in my phone, pronto.

The cocky fuck winked as he shrugged into his coat. Preston Abernathy was the kind of trouble I’d always made sure to avoid, so why was it that I could no longer seem to stay away?

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SIXTEEN

preston

I HADN'T BEEN able to lose the smile on my face all day. How could I when I'd woken up in Archer Carrington's bed? When we'd spent all night giving each other mind-blowing orgasms and exploring every inch of each other?

I'd fantasized about what that would be like more times than I could count, but even in my most erotic dreams, nothing compared to the reality. I could still feel him everywhere, could still smell him on my skin, and it had my heart lurching and my stomach tumbling all over again. I was already counting down to the next time I could be with him. I knew I'd see him tomorrow at the Elysium, but that would just be hours of looking with no touching. Something I would've been okay with before last night. Before knowing *what* his touch felt like.

TRAVIS:
Get your ass up here

Travis's text snapped me out of my wayward thoughts, and when I checked the time, I realized it'd gotten away from me. I shoved my phone in my pocket and made my way out of my condo and up to the Cue Club, the billiards hall that was exclusive to residents of the Towers.

If I'd had my way, I'd still be at Archer's in that big, comfy bed of his, but he was busy tonight, and I hadn't hung out with the guys since the night I'd gotten way too drunk. If I skipped out on them again, I'd never hear the

end of it. When West and Donovan coupled up with their new guys, they'd assumed they'd get a pass from showing up for *all* the group nights, but they got so much shit from the rest of us that they ended up bringing their boyfriends along.

So, no, I wouldn't be missing tonight's pool showdown.

"Look who decided to finally show up so we can get this shit started." Daire threw back a shot from the private bar and then picked up his cue stick.

I raised a brow. "Waiting for me?"

"We can't play teams if your ass is missing," West said. A quick glance around told me he was missing his better half tonight, and before I could ask where JT was, West rolled his eyes. "He got roped into going to some Christmassy shit with his family."

"Good," East said, rubbing chalk over the end of his stick. "He's still new at sinking balls, anyway."

West shot him a choice finger. "Don't worry, he's been practicing on the regular. But I don't see why you're complaining. He only puts more money in your pocket."

East narrowed his eyes. "I don't need Golden Boy's money. I *need* a worthy opponent."

"Hello? Your competition, right fuckin' here," Travis said, spreading his arms wide.

"You've already chosen teams?" I asked.

"Yep." A wicked grin spread across Donovan's face. "And you've got Mr. Sunshine."

My eyes shot to Daire—Mr. Sunshine—and even though he wasn't the most…*personable* of us, he was aggressive enough that we'd actually have a chance to win this thing. As long as East wasn't hooked up with—

"Gavin, you break," East said, a smug tilt to his lips that had me groaning. The two of them were by far the best at this game, and their teaming up meant none of us had a shot in hell.

"That's bullshit. You two can't be on the same team," I said.

"No? We drew names fair and square."

"You just said you wanted a worthy opponent. *Gavin*'s that guy."

"You're forgetting something," Gavin said as he pulled balls out of the side pocket of the table, his naturally platinum hair gleaming under the overhead light. "Once we knock out your teams, we face each other. So,

really, we're doing you all a favor. The sooner we kick your ass, the sooner we go out."

He had a point, but I knew something they didn't. I'd gotten in a few rounds of private training over the last couple of months with an instructor that had made a world of difference. I wasn't sure if it was enough to give Gavin and East a run for their money, but more surprising things had happened.

Like…spending the night with Archer.

The moment he popped back into my mind, my whole body warmed. It was supreme satisfaction that flowed through me, the knowledge that he wanted me just as much as I craved him.

As I reached for a cue stick off the wall, West moved in beside me, his arms crossed.

"All right, what the shit is going on with your face?"

I blinked, the smile I hadn't realized was back falling. "Excuse me?"

"You've had this goofy look on your ugly mug all day, and you're doing it again." The words were accusatory, like I'd personally offended him.

"You're saying I look funny? And ugly?"

"You look like you're happy and all off in fucking la-la land."

"And that upsets you?"

West looked over to the others watching our conversation and motioned toward me. "Can I get some backup here?"

"He *has* been a little off," Donovan said from where he leaned against the chest of his massive boyfriend, Kelly, and when I shot him a look of surprise, he shrugged. "What? I didn't say it was a *bad* thing."

Daire grunted beside me. "They're trying to fuck with your head for the game. Don't let 'em."

Not wanting them to read more into *why* I'd apparently been sporting a goofy grin, I decided to follow Daire's suggestion and focus on the game. "Who are we playing first?"

"That would be me," West said, strolling over toward the empty table, and then he lifted his chin at Kelly. "And this guy, if he can manage to let Van go for an hour."

"Eh, maybe half an hour." Kelly dropped his hands from around Donovan and smacked his boyfriend's ass.

I couldn't exactly fault him for that, since if Archer was anywhere near me, I wouldn't want to keep my hands off him either. I let my thoughts

wander back to him only for a minute, just long enough for West to rack the balls for our table.

I nodded for Daire to take the first shot. “You can break.” He had enough power in his shots that he never failed to get at least a couple of balls in.

The thought made me snort out a laugh, though, because…well… apparently I’d reverted to immaturity at playing with a couple balls.

West gave me a strange look, like he’d caught me doing something out of character, and shook his head. But before he could start back up with the smack talking, Daire managed to sink three balls on his break, and West cursed.

Daire wasn’t much of a smiler—that would probably freak most of us out—but he looked satisfied as he met my eyes across the grey felt. “Stripes.”

I nodded and scanned the table for where to make my shot. When we played teams, we alternated play within our twosome until we missed a shot, and I didn’t want West to even get a chance at the table. He was being too much of an instigator tonight already.

I easily sank the eleven ball into a corner pocket, allowing Daire to come in behind me for his.

“What the fuck,” West complained when we were down to two stripes on the table.

From the other side, East smirked. “Looks like you won’t be getting a turn tonight. Feel free to come chalk up my stick if you want to make yourself useful.”

“I’m not getting anywhere near your stick,” West mumbled. As I leaned down over the table, he hovered over me in an attempt to distract.

I wished I could say it didn’t work, but I barely skimmed the side of the ball I’d been aiming for, getting it nowhere near a pocket.

“Hah! Success.” West’s pout quickly turned into a massive grin as he shoved me aside to start playing the game. Finally.

“You’re such a damn aggravatus, West,” Daire said. He plucked two shots off the tray the bartender carried, downing them in quick succession before I could grab my first.

I hesitated taking the shot, remembering the last time I’d thought doing shots was a good idea. *No. Not tonight.*

I waved the bartender by, and as he headed to our opponents, East called out, “What’s wrong, Preston? Have a few too many the other night?”

“What do you think?”

“I think we had a good time.” Mischief gleamed in his eyes. “Scared of round two?”

“I’m not doing that again,” I said, shaking my head. “That was called stupidity.”

“That was called a good time. I’m not surprised you don’t recognize it, but what was the reason for that again? You never did say.”

I could remember all too clearly the irritation I’d been feeling at that moment over Archer’s texts calling me a mistake. No, the mistake had been getting East’s help to make me forget. Then again, if he hadn’t, would I have shown up on Archer’s doorstep? Definitely not. Which meant it never would’ve led to more, to last night and this morning…

I definitely wasn’t a *mistake* to him anymore.

Shrugging, I said, “I’d just had a bad day.”

“Seemed like more than that to me.” East’s eyes practically bored a hole into the side of my head, but I ignored him.

“Was it a bad day last night too?” West asked. “You didn’t come out after dinner with your parents.”

“Oh.” Right. I’d been so caught up in Archer’s note at the restaurant and meeting him after that I’d completely forgotten we’d all been invited to an exclusive party in Soho.

Oops.

“Sorry, dinner went long, and then Serena and I just wanted a chill night after,” I said. The lie came off my tongue easily—I was so used to having Serena as a buffer that I didn’t notice when all the guys stopped to stare at me.

“Really?” East perched on the end of the table, a curious expression in his eyes. “You and Serena?”

“Yes, me and Serena. Remember her? My girlfriend.”

“Oh, I remember Serena. Always a ball of fun, that one.”

“So you’re pissed we skipped a night out. Get over it.”

“You’re right. Who am I to interfere in a couple’s affairs?” East said, placating me. Behind him, Travis was shooting me a look I couldn’t decipher. Like he was trying to warn me about something—but Jesus, so I didn’t go to some party. Big deal.

West cleared his throat and, like he was picking up what East was laying down, said, “The thing is, though…” There was a curious twist to his lips. “Serena? She was with *us* last night.”

The room descended into silence, but a rush of blood in my ears made them ring.

Shit, had I just fucked up, or were they trying to call my bluff? I ran back through my last conversation with Serena—her telling me that she and the girls were going out last night, but for the life of me, I couldn’t remember where. Was it possible she’d been at the same party the guys had been invited to? We had similar social circles together and apart, but…

Fuck.

Every one of the guys was looking at me like I’d just royally screwed up and was hiding a secret.

My gaze shot to Travis, who only closed his eyes and shook his head, and that was enough for me to know they weren’t lying.

It was me. *I* was the liar.

“Nooo,” Gavin said, his grey eyes unable to hide his surprise and disappointment. “Please tell me you’re not messing around on Serena.”

“Of course I’m not messing around on Serena.” That would require me actually dating Serena to begin with. But if I told this bunch of ingrates that, there’d be no stopping the barrage of nosy, wildly impersonal questions that would follow.

“Of course,” East said. “You’re too polite for a messy fuck. So, whose pearls were you polishing whilst having boring missionary sex behind your girl’s back last night?”

My heart began to hammer as an image of Archer cleaning up his front door after I’d come all over it sprang to mind. Yeah, I had no problem getting messy, and under any other circumstance—like my friends actually knowing that I was gay—I would have no problem telling them that. But suddenly the lies that had once been so easy were like an albatross around my neck.

“Well, I’ll be damned.” East took a martini from the bartender and took a sip. “Perfect Preston really *is* lighting his wick in someone else.”

“I—”

“Yes…?” East drawled when everyone else merely stood there staring at me with looks of curiosity and shock.

Serena and I had been such a tight unit for so long that the idea that things between us were anything but solid had clearly stunned them all into silence. So before this conversation got completely out of hand, the one thing I needed to do was make sure Serena didn't look the fool.

Donovan came around the end of the pool table and stopped in front of me, his eyes full of sympathy and understanding.

"If you need to talk, if things are over between you two, you know you can always come to me. You don't have to keep it to yourself."

"Wait." Gavin's voice was soft as he joined Donovan in front of me. The pity rolling off the two of them was almost worse than East's smack talk. "Did Serena break up with you?"

Oh God. Now they thought I'd spent the night at home crying into a box of tissues. Did they really think I'd be standing here grinning like a fool if Serena had broken my heart? This was getting ridiculous.

"No. Serena did not break up with me."

"Oh." West grimaced. "So you really are sleeping around on her? Fuckin' hell, man, I'd hate to be you when she finds out. That girl is ruthless when mad."

She really was. That was one of the reasons she fit in so well with our group. She could hold her own. But that still didn't help clear things up.

"So, who are you boning?"

I glared in Daire's direction, and he shrugged.

"What? I don't give a fuck either way. But the sooner you tell us, the sooner these gossipy bitches will let us get back to the game."

My heart raced as I contemplated confessing everything: the truth about me, about Serena, about who I'd been with and where last night. Was I really going to do this? What other choice did I have? I'd fumbled the ball big time, and it was time to come clean—and these guys, they knew how to keep a secret. Especially for one of our own.

"Come *on*, Preston." West strolled over and slung an arm around my shoulders. "Tell us."

I swallowed around the lump in my throat, lifting my eyes to where Travis stood behind the group chewing on one of the little black straws. When his gaze dropped to my neck, the straw fell from his lips.

What was he looking at?

"The fuck is that on your neck?" Daire said.

My neck? Oh fuck…my neck. A flash of Archer sucking on it had me pulling away from West and straightening my shirt.

"You been frolicking with vampires?" East commented, helpful as ever.

"What?" West reached for the collar of my shirt and pulled it aside. "Jesus, man, who the hell made a mark like that?"

I shoved West off me. "None of your damn business."

"Come on, it can't be that bad. It's not like you're fucking one of our parents."

I tensed. West's words were so close to the truth that I could hardly believe my ears, and before I could tell myself to calm down, his eyes widened.

"Holy shit. *Are* you fucking one of our parents?"

Shit. This was not going well.

East's deviant chuckle filled the room as he drained his martini dry. "This just gets better and better."

"How do you figure?" West demanded.

"My mother is out of town. He couldn't have been banging her last night."

"*East*." Gavin shook his head. "Do you have no common decency? That's your mother you're talking about."

"Who was tucked safely into her own bed, in her own suite, in Milan. She doesn't even let my father spend the night in the same room unless he has an appointment. She's hardly going to make time for the likes of Preston." East arched a brow in my direction. "No offense."

"Uh, none taken?"

West whirled on me, pointing a finger in my face. "You better not be putting your dick anywhere near my mo—"

"It's Mr. Carrington."

The room plunged into complete and utter silence. So much so, I could've sworn I'd be able to pick out the different heartbeats pumping in the room.

Fuck. Did I really just say that?

West's mouth was still hanging open mid-sentence. He blinked at me and said, "Mr. Carrington…"

"A man?" That was Donovan.

I turned to him and Gavin and nodded.

"Serena's…*dad*," Gavin said, and again, I nodded.

“Oh. My God.” East’s gleeful tone as he slipped off the edge of the pool table and headed over to me had me sweating. “You’re fucking your girlfriend’s dad.”

“I—”

“Deny it.”

I licked my lips and looked around the group. While most of them were in my face, Kelly had moved to stand with Travis, while Daire was behind the bar pouring shots that he clearly figured I was about to need.

He wasn’t wrong.

“I can’t. That’s where I was—”

“With Mr. fucking Carrington?” West had finally regained his voice, and now his eyes looked like they might pop out of his head.

If I hadn’t been trying to work out how to tell the rest of this story, I would’ve found it funny that he was so shocked.

“Or *fucking* Mr. Carrington, apparently. Bravo. Prime real estate right there.” East gave me a proud grin, and I realized that should’ve been the biggest red flag of all.

“Holy shit.” Donovan looked me over as though he’d missed something huge—and yeah, they all had. “You’re *gay*.”

“Or bi,” Gavin said, but I quickly shook my head, not wanting any more misconceptions to be inferred from my silence. “Oh, so you and Serena…?”

“Are just friends. Best friends.”

“Incestual friends.” East waggled his brows, then looked to *his* best friend, West. “Could you please rewire your brain so you can pay me what you owe me?”

It was my turn to looked shocked as West pulled his wallet from his back pocket, shaking his head in disbelief.

“How the fuck did you know?” he said to East as he handed over a couple of Benjamins.

“Oh, please, what straight guy would sit through not one, but *two*, videos of Kelly pounding Van with his gigantic—”

“Okay, East,” Donovan said, glancing back to where Kelly winked at him. “We get the point.”

“Well, *you* certainly got the point in all of those scenes. Something that apparently young Preston here enjoyed. So I made a little bet with West.”

“That I was sleeping with Mr. Carrington?” I said.

“No.” A wicked glint entered East’s eyes. “That part was a delicious little morsel you added to the mix all on your own. I just bet him that you liked getting pounded by gigantic…*points.*”

My face heated, and Travis’s loud laughter filled the room.

“Well, it’s about fucking time.”

“Wait, you knew?” East said.

Everyone in the room whirled around on him, and I took that moment to make sure I wasn’t going to stroke out.

I’d done it. I’d finally told them the truth, and my world hadn’t imploded. I was no doubt going to get shit for the rest of my life, but the relief I felt from finally having my friends know was worth whatever hell they decided to put me through.

“Yeah. I caught him kissing Mr. Carrington at the charity event. It was…weird.”

“I can’t believe this.” Donovan’s mind seemed so blown that I wondered if he’d need one of us to fill in and give *him* a quick Van Talk.

“*You* can’t believe it?” Travis smirked at me. “I was fuckin’ floored. The most perfect one in the group out-scandaled all of us, and has been for years.”

“You’ve been sleeping with Mr. Carrington for *years*?” Gavin sounded mortified.

“No.” I licked my lips, hardly believing the words I was about to say. “Last night was the first time. I’ve wanted to forever, but he didn’t know. He thought I was—”

“Going to marry his *daughter*?” West snorted and looked over at East. “You’re right—now that the shock has worn off, this is going to be fun.”

I rolled my eyes at the two of them, but their shit-talking was making this much easier than having to tell a group of stuffed shirts that I was sleeping with my fake girlfriend’s dad.

“Yes. He had no idea that I was gay and that Serena and I were, well, just friends. He was shocked, to say the least.”

“Something he clearly got over,” Kelly said under his breath, as he came around the bar and handed Donovan a drink.

“Not at first.” I looked to East, who clued in real fast.

“Ah, the shots.”

“Right.”

Travis snorted. “So what’d you do that night? ’Cause you sure as shit didn’t come home.”

No, I hadn’t. But I wasn’t quite sure how to say that I—

“Did you get drunk and go and seduce Zaddy Archer?”

Zaddy Archer? That was a new one.

“Is that what we’re calling him?” East asked.

“No,” I said.

“What about Daddy?”

I glared at West, but before I could say anything, Travis jumped in.

“He nixed that one too.”

“How about by his *name*?” Gavin suggested, and everyone in the room groaned as he shot them all the finger.

“You gonna tell them or should I?” Travis grinned, and I knew one way or another the nickname we’d given him would come out.

“Filth Carrington.”

West’s eyes narrowed. “Filth? As in, he’s filthy in bed? Because that… Actually, that’s fucking hot.”

That hadn’t been the initial reason Travis and I thought of it, but after last night, it definitely fit.

“No, moron.” Travis laughed. “F-I-L-T-H as in Father I’d Like to Hit. Archer ‘Filth’ Carrington.”

“Oooh, I like it. Good way to keep it on the down-low, too.”

“Yeah, uh, about that.” I bit down into my lip, thinking about how complicated this all was and how it could really mess with Archer’s life—not to mention my own. “No one can know. Like, not a soul.”

“Does Serena know?” Donovan’s question was so quiet that I almost missed it, as everyone in the room fell silent waiting for my response.

“Yes, and we’re good. I told her as soon as things—”

“Got messy?”

I looked over to see East’s arched brow. “I thought I was too polite to be messy.”

“Hmm, yes, but the more time I’ve had to think about it, I’ve realized—”

I wasn’t sure I wanted to hear this.

“—that anyone who visits his sex-on-a-stick massage therapist, Raul, on the regular is used to getting quite messy. Especially when they have him booked as often as *you* do.”

Busted.

“So to summarize: you’re gay, you seduced your fake girlfriend’s dad—then fucked him—and plan to keep sneaking around until Filth Carrington tells you otherwise. Do I have that all clear?”

“Uh, yes?”

“Very good.” East looked to the bar, where Daire held a bottle of absinthe. “Pour us all a shot of that, would you? I feel the sudden need to forget the fact that I’ve just been out-scandaled by Preston ‘Poindexter’ Abernathy.”

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SEVENTEEN

archer

I SLIPPED INTO the back seat of my private car Saturday morning, the delicious ache in my body from my time with Preston almost gone—but still lingering enough to remind me of what I'd done the other night, and was looking forward to doing again, as soon as the opportunity presented itself.

It was as if my younger self had re-emerged in the past week and decided to come and take my body for a spin. Or maybe that was just a side effect of having a gorgeous college-aged guy wanting to tear my clothes off whenever he was near.

Either way, I wasn't about to complain, I hadn't felt this good in years. Hell, I couldn't remember *ever* feeling this good.

Something my willful cock seemed determined to remind me every time I thought about Preston spread out naked in my bed.

I shifted in my seat and did my best to push that image aside, knowing that was a dangerous thought, considering where I was headed this morning. Elysium's Winter Ball was getting closer, and that meant today I needed all hands on deck.

Those hands just happened to include Preston's…as well as the rest of the Park Avenue Princes.

So playing it cool today was the name of the game, even if it killed me not to pay Preston any attention. I wasn't sure I trusted myself not to give us away if I so much as talked to him in front of the others. At least I'd have enough on my plate wrangling all the volunteers and workers who'd be

helping to transform Elysium into a winter wonderland, so there wouldn't be time to think about anything other than today's agenda.

At least, that was what I was telling myself.

My phone buzzed in my lap, and I looked down to see an incoming call from Serena. "Good morning, Lovebug."

"Hey, Dad." The sound of girls shouting in the background—well, screeching was more like it—made me wince.

"Everything okay over there?"

Serena must've tried to cover the phone, because even though it was muffled, I could hear her shout, "Guys, quiet down for, like, two minutes."

There was a response to that, one I couldn't make out, and then she was back.

"Sorry, it's been a crazy morning. One of our freakin' pipes busted and there's water everywhere."

I straightened in alarm. "What? How? Is everything—"

"I'm fine, we're all fine. Well, Victoria's losing her mind because she's the messiest human in the world and kept all her clothes on the floor where it's flooded, but that's her own fault."

"Where's your super? Tell them I can be there in ten minutes."

"No, Dad, I wasn't calling you so you'd come over. I know you've got Elysium stuff today."

"You take priority over anything else," I said, my mind shifting to crisis and organizational mode.

"No, really, we're fine. The super's here, and Leslie's parents are on their way. They can handle whatever needs to happen. I was just calling to give you a heads-up and see if you don't mind my staying with you for a few days."

"Bug, of course I don't mind. Stay as long as you need to."

"Thanks, Dad. And, um…"

When she hesitated, I frowned. "What?"

She lowered her voice. "Is it okay if Victoria and Leslie stay too? Their parents are a little more…uptight."

I almost snorted out a laugh, but managed to keep myself in check. A house full of girls would be nothing but entertaining—and loud—but I was up for the challenge.

"You all are more than welcome, you know that. The alarm code hasn't changed."

Serena sighed in relief. “Thank you, you’re the best. We’ll get our stuff together and head over in a little while. Everything is just so…wet.”

“Good thing I won’t need the washer and dryer for a while,” I teased. Then, on a more serious note, I said, “Are you sure you don’t need me to come over?”

“I promise. We’re all good.”

“Except for Victoria’s clothes. Got it.”

“Exactly,” she said, and I could hear the smile in her voice. “There’s, uh, something else I wanted to ask you about.”

I opened my mouth to tease her about using my private car while they were at my place, but then I snapped it shut when a long silence followed. A silence that told me whatever she needed to ask, it wasn’t easy for her to say. And that could only mean one thing.

Preston.

“You won’t be having any…*visitors* while we’re there, will you?” she said.

My stomach fucking sank. Not because of her question, but because of the fact she had to even ask it at all.

God, what was I even doing?

“No,” I said, closing my eyes. “You don’t have to worry about that.”

When silence was all that met my ear, I added, “*Are* you worried about that?”

“About your having…a visitor?”

“No.” I sighed and rubbed the back of my neck. This was great—now we were talking in code. “About all of it. *Any* of it.”

I could hear some rustling, the noise in the background fading as though she’d moved away from the chaos unfolding at her place, not wanting anyone within earshot for whatever she had to say next.

“I mean, it’s a little, um…”

I winced as she tried to find the right words, but I waited. I needed to know how she felt. Not put words in her mouth.

“It’s different. That’s all,” she said, her voice low. “I’m used to Preston being with other people, but this is taking a little bit to wrap my head around.”

I could understand that. It had taken me a second to wrap my head around it all too. None of that would matter, though, if Serena had a

problem with any of it. So I needed to tread carefully here—make sure she really was okay, not just saying it.

"I just want you to know that before this happened, I never looked at Preston like—"

Serena's boisterous laughter cut me off mid-sentence, and as her burst of hilarity began to dissipate, she managed, "I know that. Geez. You think I wouldn't be able to tell if you were perving on my boyfr—fake—boyfriend?"

I'd had no goddamn clue. I hadn't even known Preston was gay, for fuck's sake. So how was I supposed to know whether my daughter was brighter than I was?

Clearly she was.

"Granted, I should've seen this coming sooner with the way Preston would moon all over you. But seriously, Dad, I know you never thought about it, or *would've* ever thought about it, if Preston hadn't kissed you at the charity event."

I coughed at the casual way she just threw it all out there.

Sweet Jesus. Was this what I got for raising an open-minded, opinionated daughter?

"Dad? Are you okay?"

"Uh, yes, I'm okay. I'm just—"

"Thinking about Preston kissing you at the charity event?"

"*Serena*."

"He's good, isn't he?"

Fucking hell. This conversation was going to be the death of me. I could feel a heart attack coming on with every other word coming out of her mouth.

"I'm just kidding. Look, I'm trying to be cool about this, okay? You know how I get—my jokes get more inappropriate the more nervous I am."

"Bug, I don't want you to be nervous. If this is too weird for you—"

"Oh I'll be fine," she interrupted, and thank God, because I wasn't positive I could promise to end things with Preston. In fact, I was fairly certain those words didn't even exist for me right now. Not when all I could think about was the way he had kissed me at the charity event. "I just didn't know how to bring this up, and, well, I just kinda worked myself into a bit of a state."

"And Preston? Have you spoken to him any more about this, or—"

“Yeah, we’re good. He’s just giving me some space to…process.”

That made sense. It wasn’t every day you found out your boyfriend/best friend was now seeing your father.

Christ. I was going to be paying for her therapist until I was ninety.

“Can I ask you something?”

Serena’s question had me refocusing on the conversation at hand. “Anything.”

“This thing with Preston, whatever you two are doing, you’re going to be careful, right?”

I frowned for a second, my mind automatically going where no parent’s mind should go when discussing their child’s friend.

“It’s just… You are the two people in the world I love the most, and this is kind of crazy, right? Like, what if his parents find out? What if the board at Elysium or—oh my God—*school* finds out? I don’t want anything to happen to either of you.”

I let out a sigh of relief that *that* was where her mind had been.

“We’ll be careful. Plus, we’re not really doing anything wrong, Bug. He’s of age and—”

“Have you met his *father*? He’s planning our joint engagement and baby shower. He’s going to think what you’re doing is *very* wrong. Just promise me you won’t do anything to…jeopardize each other.”

Like almost fucking him in a restroom while his parents ate dinner at a table in the same restaurant?

“We’ll be careful.”

“Okay, well, I know you have things to do, and I don’t want to keep you—”

“You’re never keeping me from anything, you know that.”

“I do. So, go and boss all your volunteers around down at the Elysium. Be extra bossy with East—he hates being told what to do.”

I didn’t doubt it. “I’ll see you tonight?”

“Me and all my friends…literally.”

“Can’t wait. Let me know if you need anything today.”

“Will do, Dad. Love you.”

“Love you too, Bug.”

As I ended the call, I sighed, but whether it was in relief or the fact that I’d somehow gotten myself into a position I had no place being in, I wasn’t sure.

Again, I wondered what the hell I was doing and how this had even happened. Preston was the last thing I'd expected, but I wasn't ready to give him up just yet. Selfishly, I knew some of my relief was because Serena hadn't asked me to. What kind of a self-serving bastard did that make me?

My door opened suddenly, causing me to start, but it was only my driver. Lost in my thoughts, I hadn't noticed we'd arrived, and I gave him a curt nod and my thanks as I exited.

Already there was a hive of activity inside the Elysium's gates, and I quickly shoved aside all thoughts of a gorgeous young thing I shouldn't want for so many different reasons. I could think about it, beat myself up over it, or get myself off to him later, but for the next few hours, I had to flip the mental switch to work matters.

The brisk wind had me buttoning my coat as I headed into the courtyard, stopping to inspect the lights being strung up the building.

"Oh good, you're here." Our head decorator, Peg, hurried in my direction, clipboard in hand. "I've gotten all the volunteer groups sorted out and in their places, so we're good to go on that front, but there's a disagreement about where the orchestra will be moved to."

"No problem, Peg. Thanks for holding things down." I gave her a reassuring smile.

As we made our way inside, I listened to her run down the list of things we needed to get done by the end of the day and nodded along. The sound of laughter and dozens of voices echoed down through the foyer, and I scanned the room to see what was already in motion.

I should've paid closer attention to the group Peg had mentioned were helping load in the trees. If I had, maybe I would've avoided looking in their direction—to stop myself from locking eyes with Preston across the room.

Heat spread through my body the second I saw him, but that was a reaction I could keep to myself. I didn't need to give anything away, not a smile, not a wave, not a greeting, because any one of those things would cause me to fail hiding my true feelings.

That was something that couldn't happen. The way Preston's lips were starting to curve upward couldn't happen.

I tore my gaze away, schooling my face to one of unaffected nonchalance, and focused on business. I gently led Peg toward the opposite side of the room, where I wouldn't be faced with temptation.

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EIGHTEEN

preston

“IF YOU THINK for one second that I’m going to take part in hauling a tree up a set of stairs, then you have clearly lost your mind.” East crossed his arms and eyed one of the enormous Douglas firs that had just been wheeled inside from the trucks out back.

Today was the day the Elysium was getting its makeover for the Winter Ball, and, unable to imagine my group of friends folding napkins or arranging flower bouquets in any kind of pleasing manner, I’d given them something simple—the unloading of the trees.

“The only heavy lifting I do is of the glass tumbler and ice variety. Not pine needles and sap.”

“Aw, that’s not entirely true,” West said, bumping into his friend’s arm. “Maybe the sap part, but you’re definitely the biggest prick amongst all the needles here.”

East shoved West away from him and aimed his wrath in my direction. “You doing this to impress Daddy Carrington?”

Aaand there it was, my new personal hell. I knew once I’d told my friends the truth about Archer that there’d be a price to pay, and of course it was East who was coming to collect first.

“No.” I gritted my teeth and marched over to him, clipboard in hand. “I’m doing this because it was assigned to us, and would you keep your voice down?”

He looked over his shoulder to the other volunteers inside the main hall. “Why? Afraid everyone will hear what you did to their president the other night? You’re right—blowing a president can create *quite* the scandal. On

the plus side, you'd definitely be taking a step in the right direction when it comes to politics."

"Oh for fuck's sake," Daire grumbled from where he stood with Donovan and Gavin. Travis had disappeared somewhere with one of the other member's sons to help him "measure" something. I didn't even want to know.

It was just our original crew today, all significant others coincidentally having other plans. Not that I could blame them; if I didn't have to be subjected to East performing manual labor, I wouldn't either.

Daire let out a string of choice words. "We could've had this one moved in the time it's taken your mouth to stop flapping."

East gestured toward the tree with a sweeping hand. "Then by all means, go ahead."

Daire pushed past him and moved to the base of the tree along with West, while Donovan and Gavin looked at me.

"How many of these are there?" Donovan asked as we pulled our gloves on. East was right about one thing—the pine needles were no joke.

"Two for the stairs. One on each side of the landing, and—"

"If there's more than that, I'm peace-ing the fuck out." Daire eyed me, his expression daring me to even *try* to stop him.

So maybe I'd be wrangling some different volunteers for the other three trees. For now, I'd be happy to just get the *one* up the stairs. I put the clipboard down on one of the worktables set up around the main hall, then moved into position at the middle of the tree.

When I realized East really wasn't going to help, I glanced back, ready to go head to head with him—and zeroed in on the main doors, where Archer had just stepped inside.

Gorgeous didn't even begin to describe just how fine the man was. His dark blond hair was slightly windswept from the cold breeze whipping through the city this morning, and dressed as he was in a heathered light blue suit and vest tailored to fit every inch of his body, it was difficult to look at him and not go over and touch. Especially when that body had been over me, under me, and inside me less than forty-eight hours ago.

The tree, and the argument I'd been about to have with East, was overrun by the pleasure I now felt from seeing Archer. I knew I should look away, that if anyone caught the direction of my stare and my smile, there

might be cause for speculation. But then again, they'd probably just assume I was smiling at…my girlfriend's dad.

Okay, that didn't feel right. Not anymore. But before I could analyze why, Archer's eyes collided with mine, and my heart just about stopped.

It was as if everyone in the hall vanished in that moment until only he and I remained, and every single kiss, touch, and word we'd shared in private came rushing back in. The smile on my lips widened, heat rushed to my cheeks, and I tried to think up an excuse to go to him. But before I could form a rational thought, Archer blinked and turned away from me, his expression neutral as he guided his head decorator out of the hall.

"Ouch. Buuurn," Travis said, which had me snapping out of my delusion and back to reality as I watched Archer disappear around a corner.

Burn was right. *Damn*. I'd known we weren't going to be able to act like we had the last time we saw each other, but I hadn't expected him to brush me off as though he didn't even know me. It wasn't like we'd never talked in public before. I could act. I'd proven that much to him already, hadn't I?

Did he really think I was going to give him away by doing something stupid?

"Earth to Preston?"

"Huh? What?"

Travis snorted. "You do something you shouldn't? He looked pissed."

"He isn't pissed." At least, I didn't think so. "He's just busy."

"Yeah." East's lip curled in a derisive grin. "Busy ignoring you."

"Shut up."

"Ooh, someone's touchy."

"I'm *not* touchy."

East's eyes widened. "Could've fooled me."

No one could fool East—that was part of the problem. The pretentious asshole was too perceptive for his own good, and while I *wouldn't* exactly say I felt touchy, I did feel confused at being dismissed so coldly.

Did Archer regret what had happened between us? Was he back to thinking I was a mistake?

Donovan came over to where I stood staring at the empty space Archer had left behind.

"He's probably just being careful."

“Yeah.” Travis joined us in looking over to the main doors. “It’s not like he could come over here and plant one on you.”

He had a point, but that didn’t help shake the mood that had just descended over me like a dark cloud.

“Damn, you’ve got it bad.” Donovan chuckled. “You look like Travis whenever he sees—”

“Say it and die.”

Donovan held his gloved hands up, and Travis scowled. “I’m just pointing out how strong feelings—”

“Of hate.”

“—of *anything* can make you feel…out of sorts when it’s not what you expect.” Donovan looked back to me. “You should go find him.”

“What?” My face must have relayed how insane I thought *that* idea was, because Donovan scanned the room and groups of people caught up in their assigned projects.

“No one is paying any attention to you. You’re just paranoid, and so is he. Go find him, make sure everything is okay.”

“And if it’s not okay, maybe he’ll give you a spanking.” East closed his eyes and moaned. “Harder, Daddy.”

“I think I just threw up in my mouth.” Daire’s droll voice finally had me smiling as I snuck another look around the room. Maybe Donovan was right. I could duck out real quick, make sure everything was okay, then come back, and none would be the wiser.

I could also send a text—

Fuck that. I wanted to *see* him. A text held no tone, no emotion, and with the way my brain was messing with me, I would probably take whatever he said the wrong way.

“Okay, I’m going.”

“Attaboy.” West clapped me on the shoulder, and I made sure to avoid looking Gavin’s way, because he’d probably make me feel guilty for what I was about to do.

Before I could change my mind, I started across the main floor and thought I heard East say, “Does that mean we don’t have to move the tree?”

I left the rest of my friends to deal with his ass as I focused on my goal: tracking down Archer. As I passed by a group of ladies working on the napkin folding, several looked in my direction and waved—and being the well-mannered young man I was, I plastered on a smile and waved back.

The last thing I needed was any kind of talk to get back to my parents about my behavior. I wanted to blend in, appear as normal as could be.

Why did that feel so damn hard to do right now?

Donovan was right: I was paranoid as hell. It was weird. The night at the restaurant, I hadn't felt this gnawing sensation that everyone was watching me. I'd teased the hell out of Archer, trying to get a reaction. But I also hadn't spent the night in his bed at that point. Something I really wanted to do again, and that was why I was feeling so…so *on edge*.

I didn't want to fuck this up. I didn't want to give him any reason to regret what we'd done, to regret me, and it was making me feel like a nervous shit.

Annoyed at myself, I stepped out into the lobby of the Elysium and scanned the extravagant entrance, looking for the man who ran the place. There was a crew up on scaffolding hanging gold and crystal reindeers from the roof, and then I spotted Peg, alone. She'd be the one to tell me where he'd gone.

That wouldn't be weird, right? She knew I was a volunteer, and maybe there was a problem with one of the trees. She wouldn't know any different.

Right? Right.

I took a breath and told myself to act normal as I headed in her direction. The second she spotted me, a bright smile crossed her lips and lit her eyes.

This would work. I just had to remember to call Archer "Mr. Carrington," and I might get away this.

"Preston, how is everything coming along with the trees?"

As East had been left with minimal supervision, I was scared to even guess, but I wasn't going to think about that.

"Great. The guys are working on them now. I just had a couple of questions for Mr. Carrington. Do you know where he went?"

God, please make that sound calmer than I felt asking.

"He was just here, but had to step away to take a call. I think he went that way trying to find a quieter spot."

She pointed down one of the halls that fed off the main entrance to a side door where people were coming and going with tables, chairs, and decorations—then, right on cue, a marble polisher began to whir loudly in the main hall.

Peg laughed. “I guess he had the right idea.”

“Sounds like it. Thanks, I appreciate it.”

“Of course. Anything you need, let me know.”

The only thing I needed was down that hall, and she’d just helped me out by pointing me in his direction. I crossed the lobby to where several workers were wheeling in tall stacks of chairs, and once they’d passed by and the hall cleared, I spotted him.

Archer’s back was to me, his phone to his ear. From where I stood I had the perfect vantage point to watch him, and when he slipped his hand in the pocket of his pants, the material of his jacket parted slightly, giving me a glimpse of his perfect ass.

Fuck, he was hot.

It was one thing to think that from afar, but having spent time with him, suit and jacket on the floor, it made him even hotter.

As if he could sense someone’s eyes on him, Archer turned to look down the hall, and when he spotted me, the words he was speaking came to a halt. A wave of pleasure spread through me at the obvious effect I had on him, but when he gave a clipped shake of his head, that pleasure turned back to confusion—and a healthy dose of irritation.

The doors at the end of the hall were pushed open again, and several more people entered carrying containers of decorations. As Archer stepped aside and they moved past him, I started up the hall.

Archer’s gaze never left me as I continued in his direction, and when he said something into his phone and ended the call, a shout of triumph echoed inside my head. That was soon squashed, though, when he frowned and pocketed the cell.

He marched toward me, meeting me halfway, and when we were finally standing opposite one another, he said under his breath, “What are you doing, Preston? You need to go back out to your friends.”

I glanced over his shoulder to make sure no one was coming in from outside and, when the coast was clear, peered up at Archer’s troubled face.

“What, I don’t even get a hello today?”

Archer took in a breath as though searching for patience, then let it out and said, “Hello. Now, can you please go back out to your friends?”

“Seriously? That’s all you’re going to say to me?” I wondered where the sexy, easygoing man from the other morning had gone, because he sure as hell wasn’t in front of me right now.

“That’s all I *can* say to you.” Archer looked over my shoulder, clearly checking to see no one had followed me into the hall. “There’s too many eyes here. Too many people who could see.”

“And what would they see? You talking to me? Maybe sparing me a fucking smile.”

Archer’s eyes flicked back to mine. “Excuse me?”

Maybe I shouldn’t have said it like that, but…I was annoyed. I’d just spent literally the best night of my life with this man, and the first time I’d seen him since then, he was all but ignoring me.

“I said—”

“I *know* what you said.” Archer’s jaw twitched as he glanced around, and when it appeared we were alone, he grabbed my elbow and hurried me toward a—“Get in there.”—storage closet.

My pulse raced as I stepped inside the small, dimly lit room, and Archer followed. I’d pushed too hard, I knew that, but would it have killed him to acknowledge me?

Archer still had a firm hold of my elbow as he spun me around to face him. Our toes bumped up against one another, and then he grabbed my chin with his other hand and angled my face up to his.

“I didn’t smile at you out there because I can’t look at you and not want you.” He lowered his head until I could feel his warm breath ghosting over my lips. “And God, I fucking want you.”

Hell yes. That was exactly what I’d wanted to hear—that he didn’t regret me, us, what had happened. He just didn’t trust himself to be near me. My cock stiffened, my entire body reacting as though he’d just stroked me—and in a way, he had. Just not with his hand.

“Then take me.”

“Preston… We can’t.”

“Then something else, anything,” I begged, not even caring how desperate I might sound. I wanted him and he wanted me, and there was nothing I wouldn’t do to solidify that before I left this closet.

“Anything?” Archer nipped at my lower lip, and a rush of air left me.

“Anything.”

He raised his head and swiped his thumb along my lower lip.

“Get on your knees.”

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NINETEEN

archer

I SHOULD'VE KNOWN I wouldn't be able to resist temptation. Not when temptation came in the form of someone as irresistible and goddamn sexy as Preston Abernathy.

Even a building full of people who could find out in a heartbeat didn't stop me from yanking him inside a storage closet to continue the conversation he was so keen to have out in the open. But the minute the door shut, locking us into the cramped space, I no longer felt the need for words.

Except for four:

"Get on your knees."

Preston's eyes darkened, a hint of a smile on those full lips. He leaned in, capturing my mouth in a kiss I didn't protest. I softly moaned as his tongue flirted with mine, and I didn't even care that he'd disobeyed my order. I wanted to sink into him, to claim that smart-assed mouth.

But Preston nipped at my lip and pulled away, that teasing grin back as he whispered, "Yes, sir."

Then promptly dropped to his knees at my feet.

Fuck. Yes. It was wrong to want this right here, right now, but desire had overtaken me to the point that I wasn't thinking straight. All I knew was I wanted his mouth on me, and I wanted him to swallow every bit I gave him.

My restless cock jerked as I moved my hands to my belt, but Preston shoved them away.

“Mine,” he said, that one word coming out in a possessive growl as he pulled the end of my belt free from the loop.

Jesus, he was unbelievable. So impeccably put together, with his dark hair styled back from his face and the sleeves of his cream cable-knit sweater pushed up his forearms, the floor of the storage closet dirtying up the knees of his blue chinos…

The sound of Preston lowering my zipper was all I could hear over the rapid beat of my heart. He wasn’t taking his time and drawing this out, something my impatient dick was grateful for.

With a quick shove, he had my pants and briefs down my thighs, and then he wrapped his fingers around me, and my head fell back with a thud against the door.

Preston bit back a grin, looking up at me from under hooded lids. “Quiet, Mr. Carrington. Or I’ll have to stop.”

“Don’t you fucking dare.”

He swiped his tongue over the head of my dick, seriously testing my ability to remain quiet. Faint voices from the ballroom filtered in through the cracks, reminding us that we weren’t alone. Not even close.

And yet somehow that was a thrilling thought. There was no reason we should be in here. There were too many people, people *I* was in charge of, and instead of being out there handing out orders, I was giving them privately to Preston.

This was so wrong.

But I didn’t want to stop.

Preston cradled the base of my cock in both hands and lowered his mouth onto me, and I drew in a sharp breath. Wet heat enveloped me inch by glorious inch, and all the while he kept his eyes on me, watching. Measuring my response. Adjusting accordingly to drive me out of my fucking mind.

I reached for him, wanting to tangle my fingers in his hair, but then cursed and dropped my hand. I was already making a mess of his mouth—it would be too much to do the same to his hair.

So I kept my hands on the door, pressing my fingertips so hard against it that I’d be surprised if I didn’t find remnants of the wood underneath my nails later. I arched my hips, wanting more of that sinful tongue sliding along my length.

He felt so good. Too good. The way he sucked me so deep made me forget where we were, *who* we were.

“God, that mouth,” I said, keeping my voice low.

He swallowed around me, and the sensation on my dick was unbelievable. Before I could stop myself, I gripped the back of his head, not sure whether to hold him there or pull him away.

Preston’s cheeks hollowed out as he drew his mouth off me, continuing to pump his fist as he looked up, awaiting my instruction.

He was so beautiful. So submissive in that moment. “I didn’t tell you to stop.”

Preston smirked and dove back on me with hungry pulls of my cock. I didn’t know where he’d learned to suck a man off so well, but I wasn’t his first, and that thought filled me with such an irrational stab of jealousy that I twisted my fingers in his short strands, hauling him to his feet.

Confusion filled his glazed eyes, but I tightened my grip on the back of his neck and tugged him forward to close the inches between us. Our mouths crashed together, giving me a taste of myself on Preston’s tongue.

That’s right, I thought with satisfaction. *That’s me you’ve been sucking.* My *cum you’ll be swallowing every last drop of. No one else.*

Possessive fire rolled through me as I tried to sate whatever green-eyed monster had risen inside me by devouring his mouth. These weren’t the languid, exploring kisses from his time in my bed. They were ravenous, desperate. Preston seemed just as eager, like he couldn’t get enough of me either.

My sensitive cock grazed the bottom of his sweater, and I hissed out a breath, breaking our kiss. Whatever that moment of ludicrous jealousy had been, finally eased, and I grinned savagely as I pushed Preston back down to his knees.

“Make me come,” I said breathlessly.

He gripped the base of my dick, guiding it to his mouth. He tongued my weeping slit and then flicked it over the crown, fast and then slow, changing up the rhythm, his piercing eyes watching me the whole time.

I had to clench my molars to keep from crying out, because *oh…my… God*. This was both the best and worst idea I’d ever had. The sensation was so damn good, but the moment my eyes slammed shut, everything stopped.

What the hell?

“I don’t think so,” Preston said when my eyes flew open. “I want you looking at me while you fuck my mouth.”

“Sweet Jesus, you’re bossy.” I took hold of my rock-hard dick. “Open up that teasing mouth.”

One of the hottest things about Preston was the way he took an order. Those swollen lips parted, and the urge to paint them was overwhelming. With my pre-cum glistening at the tip of my cock, I traced a path along his sexy mouth. And being the naughty flirt he was, he stuck his tongue out, asking for more.

Smirking, I slid myself along his wet heat, but I had a feeling drawing it out was more torture for me than it was for him.

Until his mouth closed over my dick with a powerful suction that made my eyes roll in the back of my head. Preston moved his hands to my ass, digging his fingers into my cheeks as he took me all the way to the back of his throat.

Oh God. I wouldn’t last much longer. There was no way.

And then he moaned. The low sound vibrated around my cock, and the dam holding back my orgasm broke.

It rushed down my spine, and I’d opened my mouth to warn him when the doorknob my hand rested on began to turn. Alarm pricked my chest at the same second I began to come; my release exploded into Preston’s mouth as the door rattled.

His eyes widened, but he didn’t stop, swallowing me down as voices complained on the other side of the door.

I didn’t remember locking it, but thank fuck some part of me had retained some common sense, even if it didn’t seem like it at the moment. I bit down on my knuckles in an effort to keep quiet as I shattered under Preston’s masterful touch.

“I guess we need a key. Has anyone seen Archer?” The voice belonged to one of the board members, who would be utterly scandalized to know what was happening inside this supply closet.

They tried the knob again before wandering off, their voices growing softer as they headed down the hall.

My entire body trembled as Preston slowed, having wrung every last drop during my panic. He drew himself off my spent cock and tucked me back inside my briefs. I was still breathing heavily from both my orgasm

and the fact that we'd almost gotten caught, but if it bothered Preston, he wasn't showing it.

Instead, he took care of me—pulling my slacks up my thighs as he rose to his feet, zipping and fastening my belt, putting me back together after I'd fallen apart in spectacular fashion.

"We should do that again," he whispered against my lips. "Soon."

I shook my head. "Trouble."

"Yeah, you are. But it was worth it."

How he could be in such a playful mood after we'd almost gotten busted was beyond me.

But damn, he was gorgeous.

I took his chin between my thumb and forefinger. A soft, gentle kiss was all we had time for, even as I yearned to reciprocate the pleasure he'd given me.

"Next time I get my mouth on you, I won't be able to stop," I warned.

"Promise?" A smile turned up his lips, flushed and puffy from devouring my cock. Would it be obvious to anyone else what he'd been up to?

I smoothed the back of his hair, and he closed his eyes, leaning into my touch.

"Promise," I said, the word barely audible. My heart was still beating rapidly, a countdown to when our visitors would be back, but this time with a key. Why did it seem like we never had enough time? "You need to go first."

He nodded and swept another kiss across my mouth. But before he could slip out the door, I grabbed his arm.

I wanted to make sure we were good. That the reason we'd ended up here in the first place, the fact that I'd been ignoring him, was no longer an issue.

"I know," he said, shooting me a wink as he flipped the lock. "And don't worry about me freaking out again. I don't think you'll be able to walk the rest of the day without thinking of me now."

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TWENTY

archer

SHRIEKS OF LAUGHTER sounded from upstairs as I whisked a dozen eggs in my kitchen around ten on Sunday morning. I was usually up much earlier, but it was amazing how talkative and loud a group of girls could be after getting back from a club at two a.m.

I'd gotten waaaay too much detailed information about their night out—courtesy of quite a few espresso martinis, apparently—but I couldn't deny it was nice to have the house full again. When Serena had lived here, it was never quiet, with someone always visiting.

And many times, that someone was Preston.

Beneath the shot of lust that came whenever I thought of him now was an undercurrent of guilt. Even though Serena had basically given her blessing for whatever was happening between us, he was still *technically* her boyfriend.

The alternative to that, though, was to come clean about what was really going on, and no way was that happening. It didn't need to. Not when Preston and I were just enjoying each other for the time being, no strings attached.

But then I thought about the strange stab of jealousy I'd felt with him yesterday. Neither of us owed each other anything, but if I knew he was spending time in anyone else's bed while still in mine, I'd lose my shit.

It didn't make sense. But then again, neither did wanting my daughter's boyfriend, a man half my age. We shouldn't fit together as well as we did, and I had to remind myself this wasn't something that could last.

It was fun. Casual. Hot beyond belief. And temporary.

My hand slipped, landing on the hot pan I'd been preheating on the stove, and I jerked back, cursing.

"No need to burn yourself on our account," Serena said, entering the kitchen as footsteps bounded down the stairs after her. She grabbed a carton of orange juice out of the fridge and stopped beside me, running her hand over my back. "You need some help?"

"I think I can handle a few scrambled eggs." I leaned in to kiss the top of her head and then poured the mixture into the hot pan.

"No eggs benny?" Victoria said, yawning as she took a seat at the kitchen island.

Leslie followed after her, her short hair wild and tangled. "Damn, I was hoping for some French toast."

"You get scrambled, salt and peppered, with a side of fruit," I said, pushing the eggs around with a spatula. "And bacon if I don't burn it."

Victoria smirked as she reached for the glass of OJ Serena pushed her way. "What happened, you gave the chef the day off?"

"The *chef* is right here. But if you're looking for something fancier that charges you per night, feel free to check into one of the hotels."

"I'm just playing, Mr. C." Victoria tossed me a flirty wink. "Plus, I doubt any of the chefs at the hotels look as good as you in the kitchen."

I almost choked on the coffee I'd just sipped as Serena shoved her friend in the arm. "That's my dad you're talking about."

What was with the kids today? They were so damn forward. Had I ever been that way?

I thought back to some of the shit Benoit and I used to get up to, and… Okay, we'd definitely been cocky when we were running about town at their age. It was only with experience and wisdom that the loud cockiness had turned to quiet confidence. Knowing that you didn't have to prove yourself to anyone.

"I know." Victoria looked me over in a way that felt a little too intimate, then grinned. "But he's gorgeous. And single. I have a pulse."

"And it's beating a little too fast." Leslie laughed as she held out a plate for me to scoop some eggs onto. "Ignore her, Mr. C. She's been on this older man kick."

I winced at the term, and Leslie's eyes widened.

"Not that you're old. I mean, you're younger than my parents. Actually, my mom would love your number if you're not seeing anyone right now."

Growing increasingly uncomfortable with this conversation, I eyed my daughter, who was looking at me with an arched brow, the little instigator.

"Yeah, Dad, are you seeing anyone right now?"

A flash of Preston on his knees in the storage closet came to mind, but I quickly shoved it aside before my body reacted in a highly inappropriate way.

"I don't think my private life is an appropriate breakfast conversation."

Victoria rested her elbow on the counter and propped her chin on her fingers. Then she batted her lashes. "How about dinner?"

"How about you eat your breakfast?" I pointed to the food in front of her. "I'm sure your stomach could do with something to soak up the alcohol you consumed last night."

"Hmm, you're probably right."

I reached for a loaf of bread and unwound the tie. "Who wants toast?"

"Too many carbs," Leslie said, and I frowned.

"Didn't you just ask for French toast?"

She laughed and reached for a handful of grapes from the fruit platter. "Oh yeah. Fine, give me all the toast."

As the others began to give her hell about not being able to make up her mind—with food *or* guys, apparently—I shook my head and popped a couple slices in the toaster. I couldn't begin to imagine how parents with more than one child navigated things, because girls were a handful. Maybe boys too, but I didn't have experience with that. On one hand, it was entertaining being a fly on the wall while they gossiped. On the other, when it got a little TMI, it made me want to start drinking early.

"Anyone care for some coffee?" I asked, tossing the toast slices onto the girls' plates.

When they all answered in the affirmative, I grabbed three oversized mugs and a container of Serena's favorite peppermint mocha creamer from the fridge.

She smiled and poured herself a generous helping into her mug. "You're the best."

I winked at her, but…was I? Lately, I didn't feel that way. I felt stretched too thin between work, the Elysium, and the distraction that was Preston. Not that I was complaining about the last. It was all I could do to not text him right now.

I'd promised Serena no visitors, though, and I wasn't sure how long the girls would be staying.

I wiped my hands on a dishtowel and rested my hip against the counter. "So, any word on the state of your apartment? Leslie's folks said they already had a team in there to fix it before you left."

"Thank God for connections," Serena said, and Victoria added, "And a huge bank account." Serena cracked a grin. "That too. Nothing was ruined, so that's a good thing, but they'll need us out of the way for a couple more days to reinforce the rest of the pipes and send in a cleaning crew."

"You don't mind us crashing until then, do you?" Leslie asked. "We'll even spring for dinner."

"That won't be necessary. You're all welcome to stay as long as you need to."

Victoria began to dance in her seat to some silent beat the rest of us couldn't hear. "Hell yes. Hey, we should totally do girls' night. Skip the bar scene, bring in someone to do mani/pedis, order takeout, and watch the Eras tour." She spun around to face me. "Hey, Mr. C, you like mani/pedis, right?"

Oh sweet fuck. It was one thing to host this trio; it was another thing to be "one of the girls." Especially when they began to dance and sing at the top of their lungs to Taylor Swift.

"Actually, you know what? I have a very busy week coming up at work and with the Elysium, so I think I might leave you ladies the house and maybe check in somewhere. That way you can have free rein."

A worried expression crossed Serena's face. "I don't want to push you out of the house, Dad."

"Oh, you won't be. You know I have a million points to use up, and this way I won't feel like the old guy asking you to keep it down every five minutes."

Serena bit down into her lip, her consternation obvious. "Are you *sure*?"

"Of course." I came around the counter and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "You moved out for some space. Some freedom from your dad. You don't need me hovering around when you want to have fun."

Serena looked up at me, narrowing her eyes a fraction. "Plus it'll give you time alone to…work."

The insinuation was loud and clear—to me. But in all honesty, I hadn't even thought of that possibility. Of being free to call up Preston. Now that

she'd put the idea in my head, though, I had to admit it was a good one.

"It will. So you ladies settle in and stay as long as you need. I'm going to go and organize myself a room."

"Thanks, Mr. C. You're the best," Leslie and Victoria said around bites of food.

"The absolute best." Serena punctuated her words with a kiss on my cheek, then whispered by my ear, "Tell him I said hi."

Not quite sure how to respond to that, I kissed the top of her head and made my goodbyes as I headed upstairs to my bedroom.

Once inside, I shut the door and leaned back on it, staring at the bed Preston had been in just a few days ago. Did I dare do what Serena had suggested? It wasn't like he lived with his parents. He could make up an excuse to his friends and come and stay with me.

My cock jerked at the idea of spending a couple of nights, uninterrupted, with him. The anonymity a hotel provided. We could each do what we had to during the week and come home to each other at night.

I liked that idea a whole lot. The only question was, would Preston?

I reached into my pocket for my cell phone and opened up a thread under the *new* contact I'd given Preston.

How would you feel about spending a couple of nights at the Plaza?

I reread the text several times, my finger hovering over the send button as my brain made a last-ditch effort to show some common sense. But my desire overrode it, and I hit the button.

I'd barely made it across my room to the closet when a response came back.

PYT:

Depends. Would I be spending them alone, or…

Or.

PYT:

Then I'd feel really fucking excited about it.

Good. I'll text you the details as soon as I have them.

PYT:
Yes, sir.

Two damn words. That was all it took for me to reach down between my legs and give myself a rough squeeze. I couldn't wait to get my hands on Preston again—and more so, I couldn't wait for him to get his hands on *me*.

PYT:
You're touching yourself right now, aren't you?

I froze for a second, caught red handed by that beautiful boy.

I am.

PYT:
Fuck. God that's fucking hot.

And you?

PYT:
I'm sitting in church with my parents.

I didn't know what I'd been expecting, but *that* had my jaw practically on the floor. As heat began to rise to my cheeks and guilt started to knot my stomach, up popped another message.

PYT:
I'm just kidding. But if you want me to get on my knees tonight and confess…

That little shit.

You'll be lucky if I don't bend you over and spank you for that.

PYT:
More like unlucky.

Jesus Christ. He'd almost given me a goddamn heart attack, but I'd be sure to pay him back later.

I'll text you soon.

PYT:
I'll be waiting.

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TWENTY-ONE

preston

WAS ARCHER KIDDING? Spending a couple nights with him alone anywhere was a dream, let alone at the Plaza Hotel. No need to twist my arm. I'd come willingly…and hopefully more than a few times.

I'd started packing a bag as soon as he texted, trying to keep myself busy as I anxiously awaited his next message.

"Going somewhere?" Travis leaned against the door to my room, watching me fold a pair of pants and set them neatly in my bag.

"Maybe."

I grabbed another pair of pants off a hanger, even though I didn't plan on wearing a damn thing if I could help it.

Travis's eyes narrowed as he watched me add the second pair to my bag. "Don't you have class tomorrow?"

"Aren't you the one always telling me to live a little?"

Travis smirked, looking somewhat pleased with himself. "Glad to see you're finally taking my advice."

"Yeah, well, it doesn't happen often, so you should enjoy this moment."

"Oh, I am." He seemed content to stand there observing as he crossed his arms. "You gonna tell me where you're going?"

My mind raced as I tried to think up a good alibi. My thoughts automatically went to Serena, but I knew exactly where she was right then, and that wasn't going to work. "Just a quick trip upstate with the family."

When Travis snorted I realized what a shitty excuse that was. Like I'd *ever* gone on weekend trips with my family, especially one that

encompassed a school day.

"You're a terrible liar, Preston."

"And you're incredibly nosy. Don't you have anywhere else to be?"

"As a matter of fact, I do." He pushed off the door. "Have fun, man."

With a wink, he was gone, and I finished packing in silence, waiting for my next instruction.

FILTH:

Meet me in the Plaza lobby, 6 p.m.

I STOOD AT the Pulitzer Fountain across the street to the iconic hotel a few minutes before six, my bag over my shoulder and feeling out of my body with anticipation. Even though the Plaza was a less than twenty-minute walk from my place, it felt like I was about to enter another world. A world I didn't want the others to know about, to keep us in a private bubble while we were here.

Which was exactly why I'd walked instead of using Scotty. I had no doubt Travis would've badgered our poor driver to death to get the details of where he'd taken me.

After checking my phone again, I shoved it deep in my coat pocket and crossed the street. The sidewalk under the entrance awning was packed with people both arriving and departing in cars, and I slipped by them all and hoped I wouldn't run into anyone I knew. It was unlikely they'd be staying, but the Plaza boasted stunning holiday décor and the champagne bar I knew my mom liked to frequent after shopping all day on Fifth Avenue.

I made my way through the crowd gathering to look at the Christmas trees, keeping my eye out for Archer. It took me more than a minute to spot him, his back to me as he stood at the check-in desk. He was still wearing his wool trench coat, but I would've recognized that head full of dark blond hair anywhere.

As I walked toward him, a shock of electricity zipped through me, and like he felt my gaze, Archer glanced over his shoulder. When he caught me heading his way, a sexy smile slowly curved his lips. God, he was gorgeous. It made my stomach flip to know that smile was for me.

The hotel clerk spoke, catching his attention again, and by then I was close enough to hear Archer tell the woman he'd like a couple of dinners

sent up to the room.

Just as I was about to join him, a loud voice, tinged with a French accent, said, “Archer Carrington, I thought that was you.”

My eyes snagged on West’s dad, Mr. LaRue, clapping Archer on the shoulder, and instinctively I ducked—right there in the middle of the crowded lobby.

Shit. My heart pounded an erratic rhythm as I searched out a spot to hide without attracting notice. And I *would* attract Mr. LaRue’s notice if he saw me.

Shit shit shit shit.

I kept my head down as I moved behind a nearby Christmas tree, staying out of view but still close enough that I could see them through the branches.

Turned out, I could make out some of their conversation too.

As Archer looked up at Mr. LaRue, surprise lit his features, but he was somehow able to hide any panic he might’ve been feeling. Which he surely was. Because if that had been me, I would’ve frozen up or melted into the floor. Travis was right—I was a shit liar, even when I didn’t have to open my mouth.

“Jacques,” Archer said, giving him a smooth smile as they shook hands. “You here scoping out the competition?” West’s father was a hotel magnate, specifically for the Waldorf Astorias around the world, including the one I resided in.

He waved a flippant hand. “Just a business meeting too close to the holidays for my taste.” Before he could continue, the hotel clerk apologized for interrupting and slid a piece of paper toward Archer to sign.

“Staying overnight?” Mr. LaRue commented.

Archer paused before signing his name. “Uh, yes. A last-minute decision. My daughter and her friends have commandeered my place for the night, and if you’ve ever been around a group of girls giving a concert in your living room, you’d understand why.”

Mr. LaRue let out a boisterous chuckle, slapping Archer’s back. “Suddenly I’m grateful for Weston throwing his parties at his own place.”

Something like guilt passed over Archer’s face. “Yes, well, I would’ve stayed at the Waldorf, but I find it’s best to give the kids their space.”

The kids. I wanted to snort out a laugh at that, because technically *I* was included in that group. And Archer was definitely not looking at me like

anything less than an equal.

“Oh, I’m not offended, my friend,” Mr. LaRue said. “But you have an escape anytime you need one, yes?”

Archer’s eyes flicked to where I was hiding before he looked back at Mr. LaRue. “I appreciate that.”

“Sir?” the hotel clerk said. “Just to confirm, you wanted the two filets, both medium rare, to be sent up now or later?”

Even with branches blocking much of my view, I could see the slight reddening of Archer’s face, and he wet his lips before responding.

“Let’s say eight thirty.”

The clerk nodded, and Mr. LaRue cocked an impish brow.

“Oh, I see. You’ll be entertaining a guest.”

Archer whipped his head in his friend’s direction as my heart began to pound harder.

“No,” he said quickly. “Nothing like that. I’m just…” He seemed to search for an excuse for why he was ordering two dinners, but he fumbled over what to say, which wasn’t like him at all. He was always overconfident and smooth, but Mr. LaRue’s unexpected appearance had clearly thrown both of us for a loop.

“Yes?” Mr. LaRue said.

“Anemic.”

I had to clap a hand over my mouth to keep from laughing. He couldn’t have just said he was hungry?

Mr. LaRue’s forehead creased. “I’m sorry?”

Archer looked like he wanted to slap himself in the face, but he sighed and said, “Anemic. You know, low iron. Rare in men, but what can I say, I’m unique.”

“Ah.” Mr. LaRue was still looking at him curiously, like he didn’t totally buy it but wasn’t going to argue. “Yes, you are that.”

“Your room key, sir,” the clerk said, sliding a small envelope Archer’s way. “You’re all set. Enjoy your stay with us.”

“Thank you,” Archer said, and when Mr. LaRue didn’t make a move to leave, I wondered how the hell I was going to get into the elevator.

Luckily, I didn’t have to wait long for him to finally get the hint.

“Well, I’ve taken up enough of your time,” he said, smiling at Archer. “Enjoy your night, and I’ll see you at the Winter Ball. Let me know if I can help in any way.”

“I appreciate that, Jacques. Take care.”

Archer closed his hand around the envelope as he watched Mr. LaRue make his way through the room, and the seconds passed by like hours as I held my breath. Damn, that’d been close. Would there be anyone else popping out of the woodwork to surprise us, or was the coast finally clear?

I waited for a signal from Archer, whose eyes were still on Mr. LaRue’s back, and when he turned his head my way, I stepped out from behind the tree.

He didn’t walk toward me, though, instead snapping his eyes toward the bank of elevators before turning on his heel. I waited a few paces, scanning the people around us, before following.

Maybe I should’ve worn a hat or some other disguise, but I’d been so eager to get here that it hadn’t crossed my mind.

Keeping my head down, I waited a couple feet back from Archer until the elevator opened. He stepped inside, and I followed, keeping to the opposite side of the car.

This was the furthest I planned to be away from him for the next two days, though.

The higher the floor, the more the elevator began to clear out, and once a couple got out on the fifteenth floor, we finally had the small space all to ourselves.

It was like a weight lifted off my shoulders the second the doors closed and we began to move again. Now I could look at him without worrying that anyone else would see. And thank God for that, because Archer looked good enough to eat. Fuck the filets he’d ordered for later, because all I wanted on my tongue was every inch of him I could get.

Like he knew what I was thinking, Archer’s expression turned hungry and he reached down to free the buttons of his overcoat. He didn’t say a word as he stared at me, taking me in the same way I did him.

He wasn’t in his usual suit today, but a nice pair of slacks and a black sweater that molded to his athletic frame. That was probably a casual outfit for him, but the man was hot no matter what he was or wasn’t wearing.

My fingers ached to touch him, but I forced myself to stay across the car, knowing once I got my hands on him, it would be game on.

Anticipation had my pulse quickening, and I counted down the seconds. Why was it that time seemed to go slower when you were dying to get somewhere?

One side of Archer’s mouth kicked up, like he could sense my impatience, and when the elevator doors finally opened on our floor, he inclined his head for me to go first.

No one could wipe the smile off my face if they tried.

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TWENTY-TWO

archer

“WELL, THAT WAS close.” Preston stepped off the elevator and onto the eighteenth floor, his eyes twinkling under the chandeliers in the hall as he turned around to make sure I was following him.

As if I’d be doing anything else.

It’d been all I could manage to keep my hands off him on the way up here, but not wanting to chance being caught by anyone else we knew, I’d shoved my hands in my pockets and forced myself to keep them there.

“It was, but luckily for us, Jacques didn’t ask too many questions.”

“Thank God. Although I’m surprised to hear you’re anemic with your enjoyment of meat.” He smirked, and I wanted to roll my eyes, because saying the first thing that came to mind hadn’t been the best idea.

Preston’s gaze traveled down over me as he walked backward, tracking my every step. His obvious desire was an aphrodisiac all on its own. But add in the attractive picture he made in his camel-colored topcoat over a black cashmere turtleneck and brown pintuck pants, and he was downright irresistible.

He looked sophisticated but with a casual edge. The black sneakers he wore pointed to his youth as much as his flawless face.

“What?” Preston asked when I brought my attention back up to his face, and whatever he saw there had a smile just this side of wicked curling his lips. “Are you checking me out?”

He knew damn well I was. He’d dressed to impress, and I was having a difficult time remembering my own name, knowing that I was going to

have the next couple of nights to explore every inch of him without any chance of interruption.

But two could play at this game. He wanted to tease, did he? Well, it was time to remind him who he was playing with, and that I had years of experience when it came to foreplay.

“Maybe.”

Preston stopped by the door to our suite and leaned against it. “Then why don’t you come open the door and you can check out *all* of me.”

This bold side of Preston was one I was still trying to wrap my head around. For so long I’d viewed him as the quiet young man who was the levelheaded one out of his group of friends. Only to find out that saying *be careful of the quiet ones* rang true, because underneath that polished façade was a sexy mystery I couldn’t wait to solve.

Or in this case, undress.

I pulled the key card from my pocket and reached for the handle. “That’s quite the offer.”

“What can I say? I’m feeling generous, and you *are* paying for my stay here.”

I tapped my card on the pad then shoved open the door and said across the tease’s lips, “Then get your sweet ass inside so you can start paying up.”

Preston nipped at my lower lip then slipped inside the room, his cologne swirling around me and beckoning me to follow.

As the door shut behind us, locking out the rest of the world, my cock punched against the zipper of my pants.

Alone. At last. It felt as though I’d been waiting forever for this moment, which was crazy, since I hadn’t even thought of it until it was suggested to me. But ever since then, I’d been able to think of nothing else —and here we were, finally.

“This suite is nice.” Preston dropped his bag on the suitcase rack, and walked over to the window overlooking Fifth Avenue. “I don’t think I’ve ever stayed in this one.”

Of course he’d stayed here before. The Plaza was a staple as accommodation amongst our crowd, and Preston’s family was no different. Only the best for the elite of New York.

“I think so. It has enough space for business meetings without being overly ostentatious.”

Preston spun away from the window, a smile playing at his lips as he looked around the spacious living area that embraced the gilded, extravagant style of Louis XIV. It was elegant and luxurious, and there were two frosted sliding doors that separated it from the bedroom and large en suite.

“Yes, it’s *very* understated.”

There it was. That undercurrent of arrogance. That smart-ass quality that Preston let out when he was comfortable and not playing a part. And I loved it.

“Do I detect a hint of sarcasm there, Mr. Abernathy?”

“Not at all.” He crossed back to me and took my bag. “But you do know you’re rich, right?”

“Am I?” I chuckled as he dropped the bag on the rack beside his then smoothed his palms up over the lapels of my wool coat.

“Even the cheapest room in this hotel is ostentatious.”

I wrapped my arms around his waist and pulled him in flush against my front. “That might be true. But as rich as I might be, even I draw the line at spending thirty grand a night for a room.”

“Fair point.” Preston brushed his lips over mine. “But I’d make it worth every penny.”

Fuck me. I had no doubt he would. I’d probably shell out a million for a night with him. But I wasn’t ready to admit that, to him or myself. So I took advantage of having him here in my arms now, for a mere fraction of that price.

I crushed my lips down on top of his, spearing my tongue inside his mouth in a tempestuous kiss. His hands crept up behind my neck, and his fingers threaded into my hair and pulled me against him as I tightened my fingers at his waist.

The soft wool of his coat felt amazing under my hands, and if I didn’t have something planned for the two of us, I might’ve thought about getting naked and rubbing myself all over him. But I’d planned ahead. Once Preston agreed to come tonight, I’d called in a favor. A little something to help the both of us relax and unwind.

Preston rocked his hips, his erection long and thick as he rubbed it over mine. I groaned low in my throat. The exquisite feel of his hard body pressed up against mine was torture when you were covered by as many layers as us.

I raised my head, resting my forehead against his. “Will you do me a favor?”

Preston ran his hands down over my shoulders to rest on my chest. “Anything.”

“You really need to stop offering me that.”

“Why?” Preston dragged a hand down between us and palmed my cock. “There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for you.”

I cursed as Preston curled his fingers around me.

“You like that?” Preston kissed his way along my jaw. When had I lost control of this conversation? “That I’ll do anything you tell me to?”

God yes, I liked it. It was hot as fuck knowing that this man was mine to play with and explore…

I reached down and clamped a hand over his. “You know I do.”

“Then why would I ever stop offering?”

Why indeed? The time for pretense was over. The time for worrying about who we were outside of this room was on hold. If I was being honest, it’d been over the night he showed up at my place and got himself off in my sitting room.

Here and now, we could just be Archer and Preston. Two men sexually attracted to each other. Two men who each wanted exactly what the other wanted.

“In that case…” I pulled his hand up to my mouth and kissed his palm. “I want you to go in that room, get undressed, and put on one of the robes.” Preston glanced over his shoulder to the bedroom, and I said by his ear, “I have a surprise for you.”

“A surprise, huh?”

Preston’s mouth was too much of a temptation to resist, so I stole another quick kiss. “Mhmm. So, why don’t you go and slip into something a little more comfortable?”

“And you?” Preston dragged a finger down the center of my chest to the button of my pants.

“I’ll be right behind you.”

“Is that the surprise? Because I already guessed that’s where you’d be tonight. Or, at least, I hoped.”

So did my cock. But that wasn’t his surprise, and I wasn’t going to be rushed tonight. I wanted to give Preston a night he would never forget. I wanted him out of his mind with pleasure by the time I was done with him.

“Smart-ass. You take the en suite. I’ll take the room.”

Preston grabbed his bag and walked in ahead of me. “Don’t trust yourself around me?”

“Not even a little bit.”

He grinned and disappeared behind the door, and I glanced at the clock. We didn’t have much time. I’d set an appointment for six thirty, and after checking in, running into Jacques, and getting up here, that time was fast approaching. I set about getting changed, making sure to fold and hang whatever was needed, then grabbed one of the robes and slipped it on. I’d just finished tying it at my waist when the bathroom door opened and Preston stepped out.

In a matching white robe with gold-embroidered edges, he somehow looked even more handsome than he had when he’d entered the en suite fully dressed. He’d slipped on the plush slippers that matched, and as he came around the end of the bed, I met him halfway.

“Who knew a robe could look so sexy?” I hooked a finger in the knot at his waist and tugged him in.

“You’re one to talk.” He traced the strip of skin left visible at my neck, forming a perfect V. “Please tell me you’re as naked under your robe as I am under mine.”

I took his hand and drew it down under my belt. “Why don’t you find out for yourself?”

Preston grinned and slipped his hand under the folds of the robe. When his fingers grazed the underside of my cock, I caught my breath.

Those teasing fingers trailed up to the head of my dick. “You’re very naked under here.”

I shoved my hips forward, letting him get a good feel of me, as I took his face between my hands. “I am, and if you keep doing that, not even my robe is going to cover me.”

“And that would be a problem because—”

Knock. Knock. Knock.

Preston’s hand froze.

“It would be a problem,” I told him, and reached down to gently remove his hand, “because we are about to have some company.”

Preston’s eyes narrowed. “Company?”

I chuckled at his put-out tone as I stepped away from him. “I’m going to try really hard not to be so pleased that you look quite upset by that idea.”

“I am. I thought we were going to…” He eyed my tented robe.

“Oh, we are. But I told you, I have a surprise for you.” I winked as I left the room to answer the door.

I pulled it open to see two well-built men in their thirties standing in the hall. Both had bronzed skin, one with hair black as night and the other blond as the sun. Each of them had a bag slung over one muscled arm and a portable massage table, and smiles lit their faces the second they saw me.

I stepped aside to usher them in, then shut the door and turned to see Preston was back in the living room by the window. The expression on his face was full of shock and…mortification?

My heart sped up as I thought that maybe I’d stepped wrong and somehow offended him with the idea of a couples massage. But then I noticed a deep red hue on his cheeks.

Now that was interesting. Very, very, interesting.

“Preston,” I said. “This is Raul and Johan. I thought we could unwind and relax a little.” When Preston just stood there, silent, I added, “They’re massage therapists.”

“Uh.” Preston swallowed, and when the blond—Raul—winked at him, he quickly grabbed my arm. “Can I talk to you for a second?”

He practically dragged me out of the living room and back into the bedroom, his eyes darting between me and the other room as though he were making sure no one followed.

“Are you okay?”

Preston began to play with the belt of his robe, and the nervous energy pouring off him made me wonder if he was worried about disrobing for a massage or—

“I know Raul.” The words tumbled off his tongue like a confession. One he was feeling guilty about, and suddenly everything started to fall into place.

I *also* knew Raul. He was a fantastic therapist. Very discreet. One who came highly recommended in my particular social circles and was always able to leave a client…happy.

I’d always wondered who and how Preston had been able to take care of the physical side of his desires, since he was so deeply in the closet, and it seemed I’d just stumbled on the one who’d scratched his itch for him.

“I see.” I took Preston’s chin in hand and raised his face to mine. “And when you say you know Raul, I assume you mean more than just his

massage skills.”

That red tinge on his cheeks turned scarlet, and something about this sexy little secret had my dick throbbing.

“Aren’t *you* full of surprises?”

Preston swiped his tongue along his lip. “I understand if you want to send him away.”

“Why would I want to do that?” I brushed my thumb over his plump lip. “I understand you had needs. I know that Raul signs an NDA. That’s why he’s here tonight. If you want him to go then I can—”

“No.” Preston shook his head, his eyes darkening. “I don’t want that.”

“I don’t know if I should be jealous or excited by that answer.” Preston’s chest rose and fell as I leaned down and gave him a kiss. “Go get on his table.”

“But—”

“Preston?”

“Yeah?”

“Anything… Now go get on his table.”

“And what are you going to do?”

I straightened. “I’m going to enjoy Johan…and watch.”

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TWENTY-THREE

preston

MY MIND WAS racing, my heart was pounding out an irregular rhythm, and my cock… Well, it had been the first to get the message of what was happening here. The last thing I'd expected tonight was additional visitors, especially a certain someone I was already intimately familiar with. Finding out Archer also *knew* Raul? I wasn't sure if it was jealousy or lust riding me as I stood by the massage table and undid my robe.

Archer watched me as he untied his own robe, though he wasn't hesitating at all, not the way I was. The material parted and fell down from his broad shoulders, and he caught it before it hit the ground, tossing it over a nearby chair.

Gloriously naked, he stayed right where he was, letting me get an eyeful of his magnificent body.

"Keeping your robe on tonight?" Raul's voice broke the silence.

I'd almost forgotten he was there, standing still and quiet at the end of the table, the same as Johan.

Even the first time I'd employed Raul's services, I hadn't felt this nervous. He had a way about him that was both soothing and *uplifting*—but having him here when all I wanted to do was get my hands on Archer was incredibly distracting.

But then Archer lowered himself onto the table, his firm ass in the air making my mouth water.

He didn't bother covering himself with a sheet, something I was grateful for as I finally got rid of my own robe.

Raul took it from me, and I heated under Archer's intense gaze. The way he looked at me, the way he seemed to be memorizing every inch of my skin, made any last nerves disappear—and in their place, something far more incendiary took over.

My dick jerked eagerly, and I crawled onto the table, lying facedown, the same as Archer. Our tables were far enough apart for the guys to be able to work between, but close enough that if we reached out, we could touch each other.

Shit, I was going to have to lie here and watch someone else rub Archer down? That seemed like the worst torture imaginable—until Raul's magic hands began to knead the muscles in my back.

I groaned, not realizing how tense I'd been until this very moment. Raul moved in slow, deep slides, and I watched as Johan did the same to Archer, like they were working perfectly in sync together.

As they moved lower, stretching out our lower backs, I saw a slight wince mar Archer's brow before disappearing.

"Feeling pain here?" Johan asked, returning his hands to the sore spot.

Archer's eyes locked with mine, and I gave him a teasing grin.

"You might want to take it easy there," I told Johan. "I worked him long and hard the other night."

"Oh really?" Johan smiled, and Archer rolled his eyes.

"No need to be gentle. Like I told Preston, I can handle it rough."

"Now that I'd like to watch," Raul murmured, working a knot between my shoulder blades. His words shot straight to my dick, and it was then that I realized how hot that would be. To have them watching as I took advantage of the man lying a few feet away from me.

I shifted on the table, my erection making it more and more difficult to keep still, and when I cut my eyes to Archer's, I saw a knowing glint.

Fuuuck. Was that something he'd thought about too? The idea that Archer would be down for something like that should've blown my mind. But I was discovering a whole different side to the professional he showed the rest of the world.

"Having trouble keeping still?" Archer's gaze traveled down to my wayward hips, and I canted my ass up, arching into Raul's touch as his palms slid down to my lower back.

"It's becoming *harder*, that's for sure." When those large hands moved down to cup my bare cheeks, a pleasure-fueled groan rumbled out of me.

“God, that feels good.”

Raul’s deep chuckle filled the living room as he swatted me across the spot he was massaging. “You’re supposed to be relaxing.”

Archer licked his lips. “Indeed, he is. In fact, if he can’t behave himself and lie still, perhaps he should turn over.”

My trapped cock throbbed against the table. Then Raul smoothed his hands down my thighs to my ankles and stopped at my feet.

“Johan?” he said to the man kneading between Archer’s shoulders blades. “Would you get the head?”

The head? Did he mean—

Johan left Archer’s side and moved to the head of my table, and on a count of three, the couple of feet between Archer and I disappeared until we were side by side, our arms practically touching.

Ohh. The head of the *table*.

My pulse skyrocketed at the proximity. Archer’s lips were now only inches from mine as we lay there side by side, naked and fully aroused.

Johan left the head of my table and went back to his place by Archer’s side. I leaned over to steal a kiss, but Archer shook his head.

“Not yet. Roll over.”

Oh fuck.

My balls tightened at the idea that I was about to be fully exposed not only to Archer but to Raul and Johan, ramping up the erotic factor by a million. This was one of the sexiest experiences I’d had in my life, and I was loving every depraved moment of it.

I quickly shifted to my back, and my dick leaked pre-cum all over where it lay stiff against my body. I reached down to grab it, but Raul swatted my hand away.

“Relax, Preston. I know you know how. Let me give you what I’m being paid for.”

A tortured moan left my throat as Raul wrapped his large hand around me.

Archer’s eyes were so dark they were almost black as he studied me closely, the untamed look in them promising I was going to be in for one hell of a ride when he finally got his hands on me. But until then—

“Eyes on me, Preston.”

I hadn’t even realized my own eyes were falling shut, but at the exquisite feeling Raul’s practiced touch brought, it was difficult not to give

myself over.

That was until Archer rolled to his back. I craned my head up to look down his built physique, and my eyes caught on Johan's hand wrapping around Archer's exquisite dick.

Holy shit. Any worries about jealous feelings creeping in were long gone. This was a fantasy I hadn't even realized I had, and the fact that I was getting to live it out with Archer was blowing my mind.

"Preston." I turned my head on the table, and as close as we were, I could feel Archer's warm breath on my lips when he said, "Give me your mouth."

My lips were on his before I could take my next breath, and when he shoved his tongue inside my mouth, my hips bucked up like it was his cock that had entered me. The hand around me tightened and pulled as I rubbed my tongue along Archer's. Every nerve ending in my body fired at the explicit image of the two of us in a deep tongue fuck while Raul and Johan worked our cocks.

Archer's wicked mouth curved against mine. The slick grip of Raul's fist worked me, his practiced hands knowing exactly what I liked.

"Edge him," Archer said, lying back down, his chest rising and falling faster as he watched Raul tease the head of my dick with his thumb. "I'll be the one to make him come."

Oh fuck yes. That instruction was so filthy I sucked in a ragged breath.

"When did you become such a tease?" I managed to say between moans, only made worse when Johan ran his hands up Archer's thighs slowly, then cupped his balls before lowering his head to his cock.

For a heartbeat, I thought he was about to take him inside his mouth, but Johan turned his cheek at the last second, letting Archer's thick length rub against his trimmed beard. I could only imagine the sensation, and when Archer's eyes met mine, his pupils wide and full of want, I knew it must feel so fucking good. It was enough to make me want to grow my own beard just to elicit that reaction.

Raul ran his fingers along my perineum, rubbing at the sensitive spot and causing my entire body to jerk. Pre-cum dripped from the head of my dick as I closed my eyes and inhaled slowly, trying to ignore the explosive release that hovered way too close.

I didn't trust myself to open my eyes again, knowing that if I took one look at Archer, I'd lose my slippery control.

“Archer,” I said on a gasp, hoping he’d understand what I wanted—no, *needed*.

A moment later, Raul’s hands disappeared from my body, and Archer’s words were low and rough in my ear.

“Straddle me.”

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TWENTY-FOUR

archer

THE SCENE UNFOLDING in front of me was even hotter than I'd imagined when I made the call to Raul. And it told me that I'd seriously underestimated Preston. I had no idea when I arranged this evening that they'd had previous encounters, but I was quickly learning that my pretty young thing was full of surprises.

The picture he made on his back, hands clenched in the sheets as Raul worked his cock, was one I'd never erase from my mind. And it only added to what I was feeling as Johan massaged my dick.

Preston licked his lips, his breath coming faster, and I could see the loosely held control he had over himself as Raul pushed him past the point of edging. He wanted to make him come, like he no doubt had many times before, but that wasn't happening, not tonight.

Making Preston come so hard he lost his mind was my job.

He moaned my name, desperation lacing his voice, and I issued a command I knew he'd follow.

"Straddle me."

Johan's hands went still. Raul's did the same.

Preston's eyes flew open, the yearning there matching my own, and lifted up onto his elbows. His cock jutted out, begging for my hands, my mouth, even my ass. Whatever I was willing to give, and I would've offered him the world just to touch him.

I licked my lips as he straddled my hips, all that smooth skin settling against mine, his erection pointed directly at me.

At least it knows who it fucking belongs to.

“You going to fuck me?” Preston braced himself, putting his hands flat on my chest. “Right here? Right now?”

I ran my hands up his thighs, loving the way his pre-cum marked my stomach with every slight move he made. “Got a problem with that?”

Preston shook his head and bit down on his lip in a way that told me he was trying not to seem too eager. That he wanted exactly the same thing I did, and he had no problem with anyone watching.

“Tell me you have something,” he said, trailing his fingertips down my stomach to where our hard and heavy lengths rubbed against each other, waiting.

Johan’s hands left me, and a few seconds later he moved to the side of the table. He lifted the gold foil packet to his mouth, ripped it open, and then offered it to Preston, who took it greedily.

I winked at Johan, who stepped back but continued to watch, as Preston rolled the condom over my dick. It throbbed under his touch, needing to be inside him already.

Raul took the spot Johan had vacated, popping the top of a bottle and smiling slyly as he turned the lube upside down to drip over the two of us. It coated our cocks, and I reached for them, gripping us both in my hands in a sweet slide of friction that had me groaning and Preston’s head falling back.

“So sexy,” I heard one of the guys say as Preston began to roll his hips on top of me, fucking my fist. He was so uninhibited, putting on a show and taking his pleasure, everyone else be damned. I’d never imagined he would be like this behind closed doors, and now that I knew, it only made me want him more.

As good as we felt together, I needed to get inside him, so I dropped my hold and said, “Up on your knees, Preston.”

His fingers curled as he did what I asked, and I grabbed the base of my cock to guide it between his plump cheeks. When the crown rested against his hole, he began to slowly lower himself, inch by glorious inch. That he was able to take me without any prep told me how often he’d been getting his…*needs* taken care of.

It wasn’t jealousy that rode me then, but an overwhelming desire to make sure I was the one he’d remember. That whatever was between us was so good that he’d never be able to forget the feeling of me inside him.

There was a grunt of pleasure from beside us, and I looked over to see Raul had moved behind Johan and found something new to massage. Something that didn't bother me in the least.

"See what you've done, beautiful boy?" I said to Preston, directing his eyes to the two men beside us who were clearly as aroused as we were. "Made everyone in this room want to fuck."

Preston locked on the two watching us with hooded eyes, their lust and desire as tangible as our own. Raul put his lips to Johan's neck and kissed his way up it.

"Yesss," Preston said as his ass clenched around me.

Raul had slipped his hand down into Johan's loose yoga style pants, where his thick length was outlined, and then Raul wrapped a hand around him and a groan of pleasure filled the room.

"Oh God." Preston braced a hand on my chest and grabbed his dick with the other as I took hold of his hips. Then he began to roll his body over the top of me like he'd been doing it for years.

I felt like I'd died and gone to heaven—or maybe hell. The salacious scene was one that I wouldn't have batted an eyelash at back in the day, but had since refrained from participating in as age and wisdom replaced youthful impulsiveness.

But as Preston stared down at me, his cheeks flushed and his dick in hand, I realized it had nothing to do with age or common sense and everything to do with the person you were with. It had been a long time since anyone had made me want the things Preston was drawing out of me, and I couldn't find it in me to stop and think now.

There was no way I was leaving. No way I was stopping. The tight heat of Preston's ass was my new favorite place to be, and I was going to enjoy every goddamn second of it.

At the sound of clothes rustling, Preston glanced back to see Johan's shirt tossed to the floor, followed by Raul's. Preston dug his fingers into my chest as his movements got a little faster.

"Tell them what you want," I ordered him, taking control of the situation as Raul moved into position behind Johan. "They're here to help *us* relax tonight."

Preston opened his mouth to speak but then quickly bit down into his lip. I knew what he wanted, and so did they. But he wasn't going to get it unless he asked.

I thrust up into him—hard. “Tell them, Preston.”

“I want to watch them fuck.”

I put my lips to his. “And because you were a good boy and told me, that’s what you’re going to get.”

I kissed his cheek, and as I lay back down I caught Raul’s eye. He lifted his chin in acknowledgment, then took hold of Johan’s hand and led him to the empty table beside us. But instead of climbing on top of it, Raul said, “Bend over.”

Preston locked on them, pre-cum dripping from his dick and making a mess of my stomach as his ass clutched my steely length.

Johan bent over the table near our heads as Raul pulled his pants down to mid-thigh. Preston’s eyes were dark as night, his pupils fully dilated, every sense on high alert as Johan and Raul moved into position.

“Come here.” I needed Preston’s mouth, and I stole his lips in a kiss that bordered on savage.

There was no gentleness in me now—that was long gone, replaced by a raging beast that wanted to devour every inch of this man.

I bit and sucked at Preston’s full lips as I stroked his thighs. Then I began to move in and out of him in time with the thrusts of my tongue.

Preston groaned, rolling his hips over the top of mine. I palmed his smooth ass cheeks as I tunneled up into him, and when he tore his mouth free, I turned my head on the table and said, “Look.”

Preston panted as he turned his head. When he saw Raul deep inside of Johan, he sucked in a ragged breath. Johan’s eyes were glazed over as he white-knuckled the side of the massage table and took every inch Raul was driving into him.

I licked a path up Preston’s cheek to his ear. “Is that how Raul would take you?”

Preston’s dick lurched against my stomach. I trailed my fingers down the crack of his ass and stretched his pretty hole wide.

“Would you sneak off to get massaged…here?”

“I… *Ahh.*..”

“Yes?”

“Sometimes, and—”

“And?”

“Sometimes it was just a happy ending.”

“You naughty boy. Tell me, would he use his mouth or his hand?”

“His hand.”

I nipped at his lip, then shoved up into him. “Show me how.”

Preston didn’t need to be told twice. He pushed himself up until he was seated on my cock, then reached down to grip his. He ran his tongue over the spot I’d just bitten, then began to stroke.

Fuck, now that was a sight—like a sensual dance, just for me. I watched like the greedy voyeur I was turning into with him, knowing somewhere inside that it *should* be strange that we’d both been on the receiving end of Raul’s talents. But at this time, in this moment, it served as an extra trigger to edge each other with.

A feral sound rumbled up out of my throat as Preston’s head dropped back and he began to ride me a little harder, moving his hand up and down his flushed length in rhythm with his flawless body. Beside us, I could feel the way we were being watched, could hear the erotic sounds coming out of them, but all I could focus on was Preston.

He was stunning. So effortlessly sexy. So unbelievably raw. He had a freedom about him right now that was incredible to watch, and as I brought a hand around to fondle his heavy balls, his eyes flew wide. The untamed expression on his face told me how close he was, and everyone else in the room faded, until all that remained was us.

Preston’s chest heaved, his breathing coming in fast pants now as he feverishly began to jerk himself. I smoothed my hands up his muscled thighs and around to his ass, then gripped a cheek in each hand.

Preston curled his fingers into the sheet by my head and used it to rock back and forth on my dick, and the friction felt so good my eyes rolled to the back of my head.

“Preston. Fuck.”

He nuzzled into my neck, his warm breath making me tremble as he kissed and sucked his way up to my ear. “That’s what I’m doing, Mr. Carrington. I’m fucking you.”

His words were the final push my orgasm needed, sending me right to the very edge of my control.

I dug my fingers into his firm cheeks, hard enough to know there’d be marks there tomorrow, then slammed up inside him and took his mouth in a brutal kiss.

Preston groaned and began to move hard and fast. He was out of control now, his restraint a thing of the past, and I reveled in this carnal side of him

—it was delicious.

I ran a hand up his back, knowing my control was on a hair trigger now, and Preston’s entire body tensed against mine as his tight channel clamped around my dick and made my vision blur.

Hot, sticky cum shot out and coated my stomach. Preston exploded in my arms, and I let out a litany of curses as we were swept up in a wave of pure ecstasy where nothing and no one else existed.

I couldn’t say how long we lay there like that, fully sated, fused together, body, mind, and soul. But at some point, when I opened my eyes, we were the only two that remained. It should’ve scared me, this feeling of complete and utter contentment. But instead, I found myself holding Preston a little tighter, never wanting the moment to end.

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TWENTY-FIVE

preston

THIS HAD TO be a dream. I was currently in what seemed like the world's largest bathtub with a gorgeous—but entirely out-of-my-league—man I'd fantasized about for years. A rush of jets massaged my muscles, picking up where Raul had left off, but it wasn't his touch I felt anymore.

Water lapped at Archer's chest as his strong hands kneaded my calves, stroking me slow and deep from where he lounged opposite me, a contented smile on his lips. I was happy to let him rub me however he wanted, as long as I got to do the same. His legs encased me on either side, and I ran my fingers through the dark hair there.

A light layer of bubbles from the jets floated along the surface, obscuring my view of him, but I'd already memorized every inch of him—to the point where I could close my eyes and firmly see what I wanted to. And God knew I could still *feel* him.

"Relaxed?" Archer murmured when my eyes fell closed for a moment.

"This might be the best night of my life."

"Really?" He seemed surprised. "That's a big statement."

"Why do you sound so shocked? Do I need to refresh your memory of what just happened?"

Archer chuckled, lowering the leg he'd been rubbing and lifting my other to his lap. "I don't think it's anything *I'll* forget."

"Good." I wanted to be so permanently marked on him that he'd always remember these nights with me. I didn't care how selfish that was. I'd finally gotten a chance to be with him in a way I'd never, ever expected to, and I'd be taking advantage.

“I wondered if it would be…too much,” he said, giving me a sexy half-smile. “But you never fail to shock and amaze, do you?”

I considered all the things I’d done since the night I kissed him and shook my head. “I think you bring that out in me. Make me feel brave.”

“Don’t try to tell me you’re shy, Preston. I won’t believe you. Not now.”

“You’ve known me for years. Have you ever seen me like this?”

Archer studied me as he stroked my ankle. “I’ve never looked at you like this before.”

I couldn’t help my smile. “Well, I’m glad you’re seeing me now.”

“After that performance in my sitting room? Impossible not to.”

“Just had to force your hand a little,” I said with a casual shrug, like I hadn’t needed a hundred shots from East to make that night happen. Then I thought back to the way I’d come all over his fist and chuckled. “Quite literally.”

“You definitely did that. I lost all my self-control.”

That made me pause, and even though I wasn’t sure I wanted to hear the answer, I said, “Do you regret it?”

Archer opened his mouth to answer, but then snapped it shut and looked down at the water as he lazily drew circles up and down my skin. It felt like forever before he spoke again, long enough that my heart was in my stomach by the time he said, “I probably should.”

It wasn’t the *yes* I’d been dreading, and I breathed a sigh of relief. I understood why he’d think that—all the real-world complications that we’d be forced to face if anyone ever found out. Or if the few who knew decided to spill our secret.

Which made me wonder how long we’d be keeping this under wraps. How long it would last. Not that I wanted an end date, but I could also feel the way I would fall, way too fast, for this man.

“Sounds like you want to keep me around, Mr. Carrington.” I tried to keep my words light and teasing. “Should I call off all my other dates?”

His eyes narrowed, and I felt that bit of jealousy all the way to my cock. “How many others do I have to worry about?”

Fucking none was what I wanted to say, but that would make it too easy. Men like Archer wanted a challenge, didn’t they?

“Not many. Just a few here and there,” I said flippantly, and Archer’s hands stilled on my calf.

“Which translates to how many, exactly?”

“You really want to talk numbers? What about yours?”

Archer raised a brow. “I have decades on you.”

“Then you better get to counting.”

He slapped a wave of water in my direction, hitting me straight in the face. “Smart-ass.”

“Don’t you mean hot-ass? Or have you forgotten the way I rode you earlier?”

Archer groaned, and his head fell back against the lip of the tub. “Jesus, that mouth.”

“You want it again?” I grinned.

“Oh, I do. But those decades mean I need a rest first.”

I laughed as I bent my legs and moved them under the water beneath his. “I can give you that.”

“Gee, thanks.” He stretched his arms out along the edge of the tub, but the way he tapped his fingers along it told me something was on his mind. I stayed quiet, letting him work it out until he said, “I don’t want you to be with anyone else while you’re with me.”

I swear my heart stopped at his words. That…was unexpected, but exactly what I’d wanted and never thought I could ask for.

He mistook my silence for hesitation and ran a hand through his hair. “I realize that seems a little hypocritical after tonight—”

“No,” I interrupted, finally able to breathe again. I wanted to tell him fuck yes, but I didn’t need to show how eager I was. “Tonight was different. It was with you.” I lifted a shoulder, like I wasn’t as affected as I really was. “If that’s what you want, I can give you that too. As long as it goes both ways.”

“It does.”

“For how long?” I was pressing my luck, but what the hell.

Archer studied me, his head cocked. “For as long as we both want.”

That wasn’t helpful for me at *all*. If I had my way, I’d chain his ass to mine permanently.

Guess I’d have to make him fall in love with me, then.

“Keep booking us here and you might have to deal with me for longer than you want,” I said. “Although I think you’ll just end up pissing off Mr. LaRue if he finds out.”

“Oh God.” Archer let out a rueful laugh.

“What?”

“I just remembered how young you are when you call my friends by their formal names.”

I guess that *was* a little weird, but calling West’s dad Jacques felt bizarre.

“What can I say? I’m a polite young thing.”

Archer eyed me for a beat and then, before I knew it, reached under the water, grabbed my ankles, and hauled me onto his lap. Water sloshed around us, some over the edge of the tub, but that didn’t seem to bother the gorgeous man wrapping his arms around my waist.

Archer’s blond hair seemed much darker after he’d run his wet hands through it, and I couldn’t resist spearing my fingers through the damp strands. I twisted them at the back of his head and studied the light sheen of moisture dotting his skin.

A rumbling sound, much a like a purr, escaped Archer as I kissed up to his ear. “Want to hear something funny?” he said.

I brushed a kiss across his lips. “Tell me.”

“In my phone, your number is under PYT.”

PYT? I thought back to what I’d just said, and laughed. “Seriously? As in, polite young thing?”

“No.” Archer chuckled, trailing his fingers down to flirt with the top of my crack. “But close.”

Was he trying to drive me crazy? The idea that he had a secret name for me, just like I had him, was naughty as hell. I tightened my grip on his hair, my impatience getting the better of me, but that just made him laugh harder.

“Tell me.”

Archer nipped at my lower lip. “What do you say?”

I bucked my hips forward, rubbing my cock along his. “Tell me *now*?”

Archer pinched my ass, making me squirm, humor sparking in his gorgeous eyes, and I loved being the one to bring that out of him.

“It stands for *pretty* young thing.”

Oh fuck. All this time I’d wanted Archer to look at me, to really notice me, and not the guy he thought was dating his daughter. “You think I’m pretty.”

“You’re very fucking pretty. You don’t have to sound so smug about it.”

“Are you kidding? I’ve waited for years for you to look at me the way you’re looking at me now.”

Archer’s eyes widened a fraction. “Years?”

I nodded and sat up on his lap, my hands trailing down to his chest. “You know that.”

“I just…” He swallowed and nodded. “You’re right, I do. Sometimes it still catches me off guard, that’s all.”

“Uh huh.” I ran my eyes over him and, not wanting to ruin the mood by getting too serious, grinned. “Want to know what you are in my phone?”

“Oh God.” Archer groaned and leaned his head back against the tub. “I don’t want to know, do I?”

“I mean, I’m going to say yes.”

One of Archer’s eyes opened. “Will I regret it?”

I shrugged, feigning innocence. “Guess you won’t know until you ask.”

He reluctantly sighed and shook his head. “Okay, what am I listed as in your phone?”

I grinned. “F-I-L-T-H.” I walked my fingers down the center of his chest and under the water.

“Fil—*Filth*?” Archer grabbed my wandering hand just as my fingers brushed the head of his dick. “You have me as *filth* in your phone?”

I shook his hand free and wrapped mine around his full, thick length. “As in Archer *Filth* Carrington.” I squeezed and stroked him, making him moan, then leaned down to whisper across his lips, “Father I’d Like to Hit.”

“*Ah.*” Archer squeezed his eyes shut again, letting me have my way. “Fucking hell, Preston.”

I chuckled but kept moving my hand, kissing him until I was all but edging myself.

“I’ve wanted you forever. Since the first time I saw you, I wondered what it would be like to be yours, but…”

“But you were too young. *Way* too young.”

“Well, that and no one knows about me, about…this side of me.” I tightened my hand again, but Archer reached down and stopped me.

“And why is that?” he whispered, almost as though he was afraid he’d spook me. “Your friends wouldn’t care. They’re all, well, out and proud—”

“Right.” I let go of him and gave a nonchalant shrug. “But you’ve met my parents.”

Archer’s slight wince was exactly why I wasn’t out of the closet. Everyone knew what the Abernathys expected of their one and only child, and being gay didn’t fit into their plans.

“They have certain goals in mind for me. Expectations they’ve molded since the day I was born. I was to go to school, get good grades, find a nice girl, and start a family. Then off to Washington I’d go, where I’d follow in my father’s footsteps.”

“Preston.” A solemn expression crossed Archer’s face. “That’s—”

“Sad? Pathetic?” So much for keeping things light. I let out a breath and went to move back to the opposite side of the tub, but Archer’s hand at my waist stopped me.

“That’s not what I was going to say at all, and where do you think you’re going?” The arched brow and no-nonsense look he aimed my way had my body stilling where it was. “I was going to say, that’s no way to live your life. It’s *your* life, not your parents’. Do you even like politics?”

My lips twisted, and he let out a bark of laughter.

“So that’s a no.”

“It’s just so…boring and contentious, and there’s so much you can’t show. So many secrets to keep. I’d be living a lie.”

“Because of your sexuality?”

“Right. I’m not sure I want to live my life that way. I’m not sure I can. Not after being with you like this. This is the first time I’ve been able to really be myself, and I’m not sure I can go back.” I bit down into my lip. This talk was suddenly much more serious than I’d ever expected after what happened tonight.

Archer stroked my back and urged me down over him. I curled into his body, resting my cheek to his chest and listened to the steady beat of his heart.

“You know what?”

“What?”

“You don’t have to decide tonight.” Archer trailed wet fingers down my cheek to my chin and tilted my face up. “Or tomorrow, or the next day.” He hugged me in close. “You’re twenty-one—God, I can’t believe I just said that—and you have your whole life ahead of you.”

I nodded and played with the damp hair on his chest. “What were you doing at twenty-one?”

“I had a kid.”

My head snapped up, and Archer let out a loud, booming laugh.

“See, there are worse things.”

“You’re right. At least there’s no chance of that happening with me.” I kissed his grinning lips, grateful for the change in subject. “Thank you.”

“For?”

“Making me feel better about the bad decisions I made in my youth.”

“You’re still in your youth.” A loud knock on the hotel door had Archer letting out a soft curse. “Sorry to break this up, but that’s our dinner.”

“Oh, the dinner you need two of because you’re low in iron? Speaking of bad decisions…”

Archer pointed to the other end of the tub. “Get off me.”

“Get you off? Really, Archer, I think we should eat.”

Archer shifted, moving through the water as he deposited me at the other end of the tub. Then he got to his feet in one magnificent move, and the water cascading down over him showcased his glorious body to absolute perfection.

“Stop it.”

“I’m not doing anything.” I batted my lashes just to fuck with him. “It’s not my fault you think I’m pretty.”

Archer grabbed a towel off the rack and did his best to cover his erection. “You’re going to pay for this later.”

“Promise?”

“Yes.” He walked to the door of the en suite but then stopped to look back at where I lounged with my chin resting on the edge of the tub. “The father you’d like to hit is gonna spank your ass.”

I canted said ass up out of the water and aimed a cheeky grin his way, calling out after him, “It can’t wait!”

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TWENTY-SIX

archer

WITH THE CURTAINS drawn, the room was still dark when I woke the next morning. Somehow Preston had managed to turn himself sideways in his sleep so that his head was on my stomach and his feet were close to dangling off the side of the bed.

My lips quirked as I watched his back rise and fall with slow, heavy breaths. I didn't know how that position was comfortable, but it felt good to have any kind of contact. I didn't need my own side of the bed when I was with someone, and Preston curling up to me in any way was a welcome thing.

I fought the urge to run my fingers through his hair as I watched him sleep, not wanting to wake him just yet. It still felt early, like we'd only just fallen asleep after spending hours tangled up in each other. Preston's words played in my mind, that it was one of the best nights of his life, and though I hadn't said it at the time, I felt the same. He made me feel alive, like before him I'd only been going through the motions. I thought I'd been doing all right, staying busy with work and the Elysium, especially since Serena moved out, but I realized now that I'd been missing something vital.

Preston.

I'd even moved around my schedule to work from the suite today instead of going into the office, something I never did.

And Preston—

I sat up with a gasp, reaching for my phone on the nightstand to check the time. Preston groaned as he slid from his position on my stomach. Groggy eyes looked up at me.

“What’s wrong?” he murmured, curling up beside me on his own pillow.

Blinking, I did a double take at the time. I never slept in, and the clock read a little after nine thirty. “Shit, you have to go. What time’s your first class?”

In all my awesome planning, I’d neglected to remember that he *had to go to school.*

Oh my God. It still wasn’t clicking that I was spending time with someone in *college*.

Preston’s eyes stayed closed as he lay on his side and reached out to pull me closer. “Doesn’t matter. Come here.”

“Yes, it fucking matters. You’re not missing school for me.”

Those words made me cringe, but they were the truth.

“Too late,” Preston said, running his hand up my chest.

I caught his wrist. “Absolutely not. You’re going.”

“I’ve already got it covered.”

“How?”

“I have someone in each class taking notes. It’s fine.” He tried to pull me down to him again, but I resisted.

“Preston, if we’re going to do this, you can’t skip school, or this ends.”

His eyes opened. Finally, I’d gotten through, or at least I thought I had until—

“You’re skipping work.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Really? I didn’t see any fancy suits hanging up in the closet.”

“That’s because I’ll be working remotely while I’m here, something that’s not an option for you.”

“Ah, right.” Preston dropped his arm and rolled to his back. “You’re the boss.”

The way he said it told me that he was annoyed I was trying to be the boss…of him?

I sighed. “Preston—”

“No, I get it, but here’s the thing. I *never* skip class. I never do anything I actually want to do, because I’m too busy doing what I *should*. So if I want to take a day off to spend with you, then that’s my choice. My decision. Not yours.”

When he put it that way, I couldn't resist his logic. But it still didn't mean I wanted to *encourage* bad decisions.

"All right," I said, lying back down on my side to face him. I reached for his chin, turning him to look at me. "I won't say another word about today. But let's not make this a habit. And yes, I'm talking to myself too."

Preston nodded, and I relaxed, wrapping an arm around his waist, pulling him back into me. I pressed a kiss to his shoulder. "I guess that means you're stuck spending the day with me. Whatever shall we do?"

"I can think of a few things. I thought you had to work remotely, though?"

I shrugged. "If you can skip a day, then I can too."

Excitement lit his eyes. "Really?"

"Really. So, what did you have in mind?"

"Hmm." Preston pursed his lips, making them impossible to resist, but he put a hand to my chest before things got out of control. "Why, Mr. Carrington. I wasn't suggesting we take the day off so we could spend it in bed."

I rocked my hips against his, loving the feel of his hard body as it molded to mine. "No? Because it sure feels as though you like the idea."

"What kind of boy do you think I am?"

I lowered my head until my lips were by his ear. "A naughty one who skips school and wakes up naked in older men's beds."

He gave an unrepentant grin as he surged up and rolled me to my back. "Only one man's bed. But yes"—he wriggled around, making me groan —"he's definitely naked."

I grabbed his hips, stilling him before we really did end up spending the day here. "What do you want to do?"

"Do you ice-skate?"

Of all the things I'd expected him to say, that was literally the last. "Ice-skate?"

"Yeah. You know, where you strap blades to your feet and try to stay upright on a rink made of ice."

"Thanks for the breakdown, but no. I don't ice-skate."

A look of pure shock crossed Preston's features. "Ever?"

"Since I was at least in my twenties."

"Really? But you live in New York, and it's so much fun."

"Yes, but broken bones are not. Especially when you're in your forties."

“Oh my God.” Preston rolled his eyes and hopped off me, grabbing the robe from the end of the bed. “You need to stop acting like you’re ancient.”

“Ancient?” I sat up against the headboard and tried not to grimace at my weary muscles. “I do not think I’m ancient, thank you very much. But with age comes an understanding of my limits, and—”

“I wore you out last night.”

I opened my mouth, about to protest, but then admitted, “Let’s just say I’m not too keen about the idea of trying to balance on razor-sharp blades.”

“Archerrr.”

I sighed and swung my legs over the bed, and when I got to my feet and Preston’s eyes roamed over my naked body, I hooked my finger in the belt of his robe and drew him in close. “You really want to go ice-skating?”

Preston looped his arms around my neck and nodded. “I really do.”

“Then let’s go ice-skating.”

The smile that spread across his lips lit up the room and warmed my heart, and I wondered if there was anything I wouldn’t give him in that moment to keep him smiling at me like that forever.

THE WIND WAS biting today as we stepped outside of the Plaza and headed toward the end of the block, making our way into Central Park. We’d bundled up in our scarves, coats, and gloves, but somehow the chill still managed to make it through all those layers.

I glanced to where Preston was walking close by—but not actually touching me. Both of us had decided we knew too many people in the city to risk the exposure. But knowing he was there with me, and how we’d spent last night, was enough for right now.

It had to be.

“Just so I know how embarrassed I’m going to be out there, do you do this a lot?” I asked.

Preston glanced at me, his eyes twinkling as we made our way through the park, making sure to keep out of the way of any joggers or cyclists.

“I make sure to get down here a couple of times each winter. I like Wollman Rink or the one in Bryant Park much better than Rockefeller. It’s smaller and gets way too packed. Especially around Christmas.”

“So what you’re saying is, I’m about to look like an absolute fool.”

“Is that what I’m saying?” Preston chuckled. “Why not look at it like—if you fall, I’ll be right there to catch you.”

I stopped in my tracks, and the horrified expression on my face made Preston laugh. “That is not making me feel better.”

“Really? I thought it was kind of cute.” He leaned in and said under his breath, “The idea of you falling for me.”

“On my ass?”

“Well, I said I’d catch you.” The slight quirk of his lips told me he was finding my apprehension far too amusing. “You know, this might be the first thing I’ve found that you’re not good at.”

I scoffed. “And that makes you happy?”

“Not happy. It’s just nice to know you have some flaws.”

“Trust me, I have plenty.”

“Really? Could’ve fooled me. From where I’m standing”—Preston made a show of giving me a thorough once-over—“you are pretty much perfection.”

Damn he was good for my ego. “I’m not perfect.”

“Uh huh, well, tell that to all the single men—*and* women—in New York. You’re a catch, and that pretty much makes you perfect.”

I cocked my head to the side, trying to decide if he was being serious or messing with me. “Just because I’m single—”

“And good looking.”

I snorted. “—and *so* good looking, doesn’t mean I’m a catch.”

“Yes it does.” Preston eyed me with a wicked grin. “And if they knew how good you were in bed?” He whistled.

I reached out and shoved him in the arm. “Stop it.”

“Okay, but seriously, why are you single?”

“Other than today, I’m a bit of a workaholic, if you haven’t noticed.”

“Oh, I noticed. I just figured if you were with someone you wouldn’t be.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. I haven’t really been looking.”

Preston arched a brow. “So you’re blaming the fact that you, New York’s most eligible bachelor, are single because you’re a workaholic, yet somehow I managed to convince you to take a day off to go ice-skating?”

“In all fairness, you were naked and straddling me when you asked.”

“So all it takes is a… What did you call me? A pretty young thing stroking your cock?”

Giggles broke out behind us as a couple of women in running gear overheard. Once they passed by, I shot Preston a look.

“Really?”

He smiled, utterly unrepentant. “Was I wrong?”

As the rink came into view, I shook my head, because no, he wasn’t. What was it about him that had me willing to go out of my comfort zone and actually enjoy it?

“Well, just so you know,” he said. “I’m flattered.”

With that bright smile still on his face, he brushed his hand against mine, and the urge to link my fingers with his was overwhelming. Caution held me back, though, because even with the people we knew at work or in school, I really didn’t want an unwelcome surprise like Jacques last night.

I had to shove my hands in the pockets of my coat so I didn’t touch him, but before he could even look disappointed at that, I bumped his shoulder with mine.

“Come on. Let’s see how many times you’ll have to catch me.”

“You’re playing hooky to be with me,” Preston said smugly. “Looks like I already have.”

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TWENTY-SEVEN

preston

“NOT GONNA LIE, I’m getting a little nervous.” Archer glanced out the back window of his car and then raised a brow at me.

“What? You don’t trust me? Even after I didn’t let you break a hip at the rink?” I smiled, because Archer wasn’t anywhere near the disaster on ice that he’d claimed to be. As a matter of fact, he’d only *almost* fallen once, and that was due to the group of kids weaving in and out between our legs. The list of things Archer did well kept growing.

He held his hands up. “You’re right. We could be in the ER right now if it weren’t for you.”

“Exactly. So in keeping with the festive holiday theme we’ve got going on today, and the fact that we’re trying to stay on the down-low, this place is perfect.”

His driver opened the back door, and I stepped out first, followed by Archer. He whispered something to his driver, who nodded, and then we headed toward the entrance of Rolf’s.

Archer reached for the door first, pulling it open for me, and that made my stomach do a little flip. Such a gentleman, opening doors for me—but also such a *date* thing to do.

Because, holy shit, we were on a date. Me and Archer Carrington. That blew my mind.

I felt Archer’s hand on my lower back, guiding me inside, but the moment the hostess greeted us, it disappeared. I wished I could tell him to put it back, or reach for him, but those were luxuries we couldn’t afford

outside of a hotel room. It was enough just to be somewhere, anywhere, with him.

"You said festive, but I think Christmas threw up in here," Archer said as he looked around at the décor.

It *was* a little ostentatious, with so many holiday lights, garlands, and decorations that you couldn't see the ceiling or the walls. There had to be thousands of ornamental balls of every color hanging from the ceiling and wrapped around pillars. The wildest part was that Rolf's was like this all the time, not just for Christmas.

"What's wrong, Mr. Carrington? Can't handle a few balls in your face?" I teased, as the hostess led us past the bar to a small table for two.

Before I could sit down, Archer pulled out a chair and motioned for me to sit.

First he was holding open doors, and now he was pulling my chair out for me? There was definitely something to be said for dating an older man.

"Thank you," I said, taking the seat.

"You're welcome." He scanned the room before sitting down, and when his eyes stayed over my shoulder, I frowned and looked behind me.

"What's wrong?" I asked. "Someone you know?"

He shook his head, unfolding his napkin and laying it across his lap. Then he finally looked at me and smiled, while under the table I felt his foot brush against mine.

"I needed this view so I can watch the door and play with you at the same time." He winked, and I felt my stomach do that damn flipping thing again. "Oh, would you look at that, you're blushing."

My cheeks *did* suddenly feel a little warmer. "No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are." Archer leaned across the table and said in a voice that did nothing to help the heat in my cheeks, "It's fucking adorable."

It was *embarrassing*. After everything we'd done together last night, I was getting all rosy-cheeked because he was playing footsie with me. I highly doubted Archer's previous dates would blush so easily.

He chuckled as he picked up the menu. "What's got you nervous? The public space or my touching you? I can stop."

My cheeks burned even hotter then, because it was none of that. I *loved* the fact he was touching me, even more that he was doing it in public. If I could, I would announce to everyone in this restaurant that Archer was mine, and I'd reach over and hold his hand right here at the table.

“I don’t want you to stop.” I moved my other leg to rub against his. “And I’m not nervous. It’s just…”

Archer raised a brow when I paused, and I shrugged, trying to play off how much I’d enjoyed those familiar touches, those intimate moments on the way in.

“It’s just… I like the way you were…um, treating me.”

“Treating you?” Archer put his menu down and the question in his eyes told me he wasn’t quite getting the fact that *I* was usually the one doing all the…gentlemanly things.

“Opening the door, pulling out my chair.” I bit down into my lip. “You know, date things.”

“Ah, I see. Well, this *is* our first date.”

My heart skipped a beat at the confirmation that he felt the same way I did about the day—music to my ears. But then my mind played it over and over in my head. “First date… You say that like there’ll be more.”

Archer ran his gaze down over me. “I sure hope so.” He gestured to my menu. “Now pick something to eat, before I drag you over here and—”

“Eat my wiener?”

Archer’s mouth fell open, his words leaving him until I started to laugh.

“Sorry, I couldn’t help it. We’re in a German restaurant. I’m allowed to say wiener.”

“Of course we are. Balls and sausages.”

“I mean, do I know how to pick a first date or what?”

“It’s definitely one I’ll remember.” Archer’s lips twitched, even as his eyes softened. “For many reasons.”

By the time the waitress stopped by, we’d each picked out something to eat, but apparently we’d both had enough sausage for now. Archer went for the roasted Long Island duckling with mashed potatoes, red cabbage, and cranberry sauce, while I opted for the Rahm schnitzel in paprika cream sauce with vegetables and spätzle.

For now, though, we were sharing a jumbo shrimp cocktail.

“These are delicious.” I dunked the end into the spiced tomato sauce on the plate.

“Watching you eat them is delicious.”

I took another bite, licking my lips clean. “Are you flirting with me, Mr. Carrington?”

“Are you trying to drive me out of my mind, Preston?”

I brought my thumb up to my lips and sucked it clean. “Maybe a little.”

“Maybe a lot, I’d say.” Archer took a bite of his own shrimp and shook his head.

“What?” I grinned and reached for the glass of wine in front of me, enjoying the choice of vintage that Archer had picked out for us.

“Nothing.”

“Liar.”

He swallowed his bite of food and reached for his own glass, settling back in his seat. “Okay, fair enough. I was just thinking how…young you make me feel.”

I paused, wine glass halfway to my mouth. “And is that a good thing, or—”

“Yes, yes.” He grinned at me, a relaxed, charming smile that was so sexy I decided it was all mine. “It’s a very good thing. I think I’d forgotten how to have fun, how to exist outside of work and family, and I’d definitely forgotten to take the time to enjoy…” His words trailed off as he eyed my body, and I knew what he meant, but there was no way in the world I wasn’t going to push him to say it.

“To enjoy *what*?”

Archer took a sip of his wine, his eyes finding mine over the rim of his glass. “You know what.”

“I do, but can you tell me anyway?”

“Now who’s flirting?”

“And who’s driving who crazy?”

Archer scoffed. “Touché.”

“Sooo…” I sat forward in my chair and rubbed my foot up the inside of his leg. “What had you forgotten to take the time to enjoy?”

Archer shifted in his seat in a way that told me his dick was just as interested in this answer as mine now was. “A sexy body and flirty mouth. But don’t worry,” he promised as he topped off both our glasses. “I plan to take the time to rectify that as often as possible, now that I’ve found someone who has both.”

Jesus. He was waaay better at this dating thing than me. Probably because he’d been doing it longer. But somehow Archer had made me feel *all* the things in one date. I’d been nervous, excited, happy—and now hot as hell.

“Hmm. You sure you can fit me in with those workaholic tendencies you mentioned earlier?” I lifted my glass to my mouth, teasing the edge with my lips and watching the way Archer’s eyes caught on the move. “I can be a little distracting.”

“I think we both know it’s more than a little.” His gaze darkened as I swallowed down a mouthful of wine. My tongue dipped out to catch a wayward drop from my lips, and I saw the way his fingers tightened around the stem of his glass.

“You’re looking at me like you want a to-go bag,” I said with a smirk.

“I’m seriously considering it.” Archer hooked his foot beneath mine, and I was surprised when he didn’t flag down the waitress. “But I can show some self-restraint to get through lunch. I think.”

I chuckled. “Guess I’d better make sure never to bring you lunch at the office. You might shove everything off your desk and have your way with me.”

As soon as I said the words, I remembered the way I’d wanted to do just that during my last visit. From the way he stilled with his wine halfway to his lips, so did he.

He set it down without drinking.

“This is a fantasy of yours,” he said.

I’d started to agree when the hostess came back to seat a couple behind me, and I leaned forward, keeping my voice low. “You fucking me into your desk so hard I feel you for days? I’ve thought about it more than a few times…*Mr.* Carrington.”

Desire flared between us, and Archer’s hand on the table inched toward my own. It was only the slightest touch, just his fingertips grazing mine, but it felt like an electric shock.

He swallowed thickly. “I’ll have to see if I can make that happen. *After* hours, of course.”

Of course. Because no one could know about us, especially those he worked with. Even if I always visited under the guise of working on Elysium projects, I doubted we’d be able to stay a secret if they heard his heavy thrusts making his desk creak.

I cocked my head, studying his sinful mouth. “I look forward to it, sir.”

“You better stop. Or is punishment another one of your fantasies?”

“No, but I’m beginning to think I’d be open to anything with you.”

“Funny. I was just thinking the same about you.”

Before he could elaborate on that, our meals arrived, bursting the private bubble we'd been in. Archer unhooked his foot from mine but kept us touching as he cut into his duck.

I tried to behave myself, tried to stop squirming in my chair from the clear picture of us I'd been building in my mind. Since this was a date, that moved us past the realm of just fucking, and there were things I'd always been curious about but had never gotten a chance to ask him.

"Do you enjoy all these things you do?" I asked.

"Such as?"

"Your job. Running the Elysium. Are they things you enjoy, or did you get forced into them?"

Archer topped his duck off with a bit of the potatoes and took a bite. "I don't think I'd work so much if I didn't enjoy it. It was always my goal to own my own company. I just wasn't sure what form it would take until college. I got a job at a talent agency, worked my way up, realized it was something I could see myself doing in the long run."

"How did you know you'd be good at it?"

"I didn't. Sometimes you don't know what you're good at until you try everything."

His words struck a chord inside me that had my questions faltering. I'd never really had a choice to try anything. My path had been set my entire life, and like the good son I was, I'd never questioned it. Why would I? It was the easy road, the one already laid out for me to take and succeed my father.

But did I really want to be stuck doing something I hated when there was a chance I could find something I loved instead?

God, I didn't want to think about that right now, because it would require asking myself hard questions I didn't want to know the answers to yet.

I cut into my schnitzel and dipped a corner in the cream sauce. "And the Elysium?"

"That one I kind of fell into because I knew I was the best choice." When I looked up, he winked. "Who else could corral a bunch of elitists and get them to part with their money? My contacts make it easier than most."

"It's not your contacts that get people to drop money at your feet." When Archer lifted a brow in question, I said, "You also happen to be

gorgeous. You think anyone can say no to you?”

He bit back a grin and shrugged. “It’s not a word I hear very often. I doubt it’s one you’re entirely familiar with either.”

“Ha, nice try, but we’re not talking about me.”

“That doesn’t seem fair.”

“Maybe not, but I’ve wondered about you far longer than you’ve wondered about me.”

Archer brought his napkin up to his lips, a curious look in his eyes. “You can ask me anything.”

I knew some of the details of how Serena had been born, that her mom and Archer had been young and it was a one-night kind of thing. What I didn’t know was if he’d ever been with other women.

“Are you gay?” I asked before I fully thought through *how* I wanted to ask him, and the look of disbelief on his face was comical. “Okay, let me rephrase: are you bi or gay or…?”

Amusement had one side of his mouth curving up as he swirled his wine. “Very, very gay. Do I have to guess why you’re asking?”

“No, that answer pretty much sums it up.”

He took a sip of his drink, and as he set it down, his fingers grazed mine. “Serena was quite the surprise. For both her mom and me.”

“One you regret?”

“No.” He shook his head adamantly. “God, no. She’s the best thing about me.”

It made my heart clench the way he talked about her, the way he obviously felt about her, because I knew in my gut that my parents didn’t feel the same way about me. Sure, they loved me the way they’d been brought up to know how, but it wasn’t the same. I’d already heard from Serena the way Archer had done everything in his power to help her when she went through a destructive phase in her teen years. At that point she’d been commuting between her parents for years, her mom on the West Coast and Archer in New York. From what she’d told me, she’d gotten a little too good at keeping secrets, falling into the wrong crowd when her mom had to travel so much for work. It was Archer who’d put a stop to the back-and-forth, to create the consistency and routine she needed by living full-time with him. Being such an amazing father only made him that much more attractive in my eyes.

Like I needed a longer list.

“So her mom was the only woman you were ever…with?”

“You know when I said sometimes you don’t know what you’re good at until you try? Well, same thing goes for not knowing what you like until you try.” He grinned, his eyes crinkling at the edges before he mouthed, “Very gay.”

“That’s good to know. And just so *you* know…” I pointed at myself. “Also very gay.”

His gaze moved to the entrance briefly, and then he reached for my hand, turning it face up so he could trail his fingers up and down my palm. “Do you have any other questions for me?”

How was I supposed to do anything but breathe with him touching me? In public, no less.

“Preston…?”

I tried to clear the lust-filled fog infiltrating my brain, but it was impossible. “I’m sure I have more, but I can’t seem to think when you’re doing that.”

“Oh? Feeling distracted?”

My cock throbbed, and I shifted on my chair. “Incredibly.”

“This is how you make me feel,” he said, his voice husky. “All the fucking time.”

Oh my God. Forget the questions. Forget the food, the other diners. All that existed in that moment was Archer, his sexy-as-sin voice, and those dark eyes that were staring into mine like he could see inside my soul. It made me weak in the knees, and I had to open my mouth twice before I could get the words out.

“Want to get that to-go box yet?”

That smoldering stare only intensified, sending a wave of goosebumps all over my body.

“Fuck yes.”

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TWENTY-EIGHT

preston

“YOU MISSED ONE.” East pointed with his martini at the lone pillow lying on Gavin’s stripped bed. He leaned casually against the wall as he watched the rest of us carry out boxes of Gavin’s belongings from his room, and if any of us had a hand free, we’d all be slapping him with it.

Daire growled in East’s direction. “You could lift a fucking finger, asshole.”

East cocked a brow and slowly lifted his pinky from his glass. “There.”

Good God, this was about to go from bad to worse if these two remained within a few feet of each other. The tension was already palpable, as none of us were used to doing much manual labor, and this was already our fourth trip down here.

Hoping to defuse things before Daire lost his mind or East threw the rest of his martini on his scowling face, I shifted the heavy box in my arms and stepped in between them. “East, just put it on top of my pile and then go oversee somewhere else, please.”

He pursed his lips and sniffed arrogantly, but strolled over to the bed and picked up the pillow between his fingertips. “Since you asked so nicely.” He dropped it on top of my already overflowing box, and I held it down with my chin.

“Think you can manage the door, or will that cause you to break a sweat?” West called out over his shoulder, already heading toward the living room.

“You really are a very needy bunch.” East rolled his eyes and moved past us. He opened the front door of the condo and leaned against it as we

all filed out into the hallway. “Nice job,” he said, patting West on the head as he passed, and then doing the same to West’s boyfriend, JT. “Keep up the good work.”

“Touch me and die,” Daire said, not even sparing East a glance as he followed after JT.

“Looks like someone already did that,” East called after him, staring pointedly at the black and purple bruises surrounding Daire’s left eye that had mysteriously appeared since yesterday. “I never got a call to help you hide a body, so is whoever did that still limping around somewhere?”

Daire grunted in response, neither admitting nor denying culpability.

I brought up the rear, shaking my head at East. “Being an antagonizer isn’t winning you any favors.”

“Ah, yes, perhaps I should endeavor to be more like you, future statesman Preston Abernathy,” he said, letting the door slam shut behind him. “Pretend to abide by the rules while really being a total freak behind closed doors, get myself a fake arm-candy girlfriend, and kiss a lot of ass.”

“You’re just jealous he’s not kissing yours.” West smirked as the elevator doors opened and we all piled inside. It was a tight fit, but thankfully we only had a couple of floors to go.

“His loss, since I have a great ass.” East turned back to me and raised an appraising brow as he studied my face. “Although you do have nice lips. It’s a shame you waste them on Serena. Oh, wait, you don’t. You waste them on her *dad*.”

I shook my head. “For fuck’s sake, East.”

His smug grin kicked up higher on one side. “Let me know if you ever change your mind or want a third—”

There was a groan from outside the elevator, and I turned to see the doors had opened and Serena stood there looking a little…green.

“This is so not a conversation I want to be a part of,” she said.

East shrugged. “All I’m saying is I’m very good at bending over.”

“East, the only thing that’ll happen if you bend over is my foot up your ass,” she said, taking the top few pillows from the overflowing box I carried before they could tumble to the ground.

“You know what? I might actually enjoy that.” East glanced over my shoulder to look at her feet. “How big are we talking?”

“Oh my God, don’t even think about it.” I shoved him off and followed Serena to Daire’s condo—well, Daire and *Gavin’s* condo, which I still

couldn’t believe was actually happening. The surliest in our group never shared anything, not his thoughts, not his time, and certainly not his home. But here he was, somehow agreeing to let Gavin take the spare bedroom to get away from the lovefest happening in his old condo between his brother, Donovan, and Kelly.

One by one we entered the condo and dropped the boxes by the entrance —which, from the scowl Daire shot us as he walked past and into Gavin’s new room, wasn’t where he wanted them.

Donovan, Kelly, and Travis were all gathered by the kitchen island with drinks in hand, and judging by the bottles of alcohol along the counter, it wasn’t water in those glasses.

“You three are just as bad as East,” I remarked, cracking my neck from side to side and then rolling my shoulders to ease the ache that hauling boxes for hours had caused.

Travis blinked, looking utterly bored. “We’re done, right? You brought up the last of it.”

“Uh, we’re missing my furniture, if you haven’t noticed,” Gavin said as he walked out of his room and surveyed the rest of the stuff we’d brought. “I need my bed, or did you expect me to sleep on the floor?”

West shook his head as he reached for an empty glass and the bottle of bourbon. “Nope. That’s where we draw the line.”

Gavin balked. “Excuse me?”

“We aren’t carrying your fucking furniture, and even if we wanted to, we couldn’t.”

A flush of angry red crept up into Gavin’s pale cheeks. “Why the hell not?”

“Because the only way to get it up here is through the service elevator,” Daire said, striding out of Gavin’s room and kicking at the boxes left by the entrance. “Management will deal with it this weekend.”

The way Gavin’s mouth fell open was comical. “Where do you expect me to sleep?”

“Maybe if you ask nicely, Daire will let you snuggle up to him,” Travis said, and Donovan snorted.

“I’m thinking Gavin would like to *see* the sun rise tomorrow.”

No lie. The probability that anyone would live to see the next day after a night in Daire’s bed was…unlikely. The guy barely tolerated humans as it was. I think we were probably the only few he bothered with, and that was

only because we were forced on him through his parents trying to make him more social.

Daire hefted one of the remaining boxes into his arms. “Go fuck yourselves.”

And clearly that worked.

“How about we make up a bed for Gavin on the couch?” I suggested, trying to find a solution before a fight broke out.

“Is that what you used to do when you spent the night at Serena’s?” East’s lip curled. He was really on a roll tonight. “Or did you sneak into Daddy’s bed even back then?”

“Why are you suddenly so interested in other people’s relationships?” Serena fired back. “Feeling a little *hard* up over there?”

“Oooh.” I grinned, proud of the way she could always hand East his ass when he needed it. “I love when you get feisty.”

She winked at me like a co-conspirator, and it felt good to have my best friend back by my side. I’d given her some space like she asked, but when she texted wanting to hang out, I’d felt a sense of relief that we could be back on familiar terms. And there was nothing like giving East a good slap-down to get life back to normal.

Serena glanced at Gavin. “Do you have a set of sheets somewhere handy?”

“Sure, let me pull them out of my pocket.”

“Hey, don’t talk to her like that,” I snapped. “She’s trying to help you.”

Gavin said nothing, just rolled his eyes and turned on his heel to head back into the room that would soon be his. Jesus, maybe him and Daire would get along better than we thought. In the last couple of weeks, it felt as though Gavin had undergone a lobotomy. He was rude, surly, and short-tempered, nothing like the easygoing kid we were all used to.

“Ignore him, Serena.” Donovan let out a sigh and looked down the hall after his brother. “That’s how I’m dealing with him right now.”

“Not sure that’s working,” West said in all his wisdom.

“Yeah, well, every time I ask him what’s wrong, he says nothing and storms off.”

“Maybe ’cause it’s none of your fuckin’ business,” Daire said, popping the top off a bottle of beer.

“He’s my brother,” Donovan pointed out. “I’m just trying to help. But I guess he’ll talk when he’s ready.”

“Well, until then…” I looked at the both of them. “Tell him the next time he talks to Serena that way I’m going to do more than tell him to be quiet.”

“Reaaally?” Travis looked me up and down. “But aren’t you afraid that might snag your cardigan? Wait…where *is* your cardigan? Did you leave it at Filth’s house?”

Serena wrinkled her nose. “Filth? Do I even want to know?”

I started to shake my head, but Travis opened his big mouth.

“It stands for Father I’d Like to—”

I slapped a hand over his mouth, but not quick enough, because Serena groaned and said, “Yep, got it. Thanks so much for that.”

“You’re such a shit,” I said to Travis, giving him a shove.

“*I’m* the shit? Serena, how are you feeling about Preston these days?”

East chose that moment to insert himself back in the conversation, hopping up on the counter and fixing his gaze on her. “Yes, this is quite the incestuous little situation we have going on here. I’d *love* to get your take on it.”

“My take on it is: what they do in their private life should stay exactly that, private, as in I don’t want to know anything at all—*ever*—about it. So keep your horny, gossipy questions for when I’m not around.”

“Hold on.” West frowned. “So you’re still going to be around.”

“West. Shut it. They’re still friends, Jesus,” JT said.

“Yeah, but they’re not *fuck* friends.”

JT rolled his eyes. “They were never—” He cut himself off and gestured with his hand, too polite to say what his loudmouth boyfriend had.

“Nothing has changed here, guys,” Serena said, and Travis scoffed.

“I mean, something pretty big has changed.”

“I *mean* for appearances’ sake. We talked about it and decided that we’d still be here for each other for however long either of us wants or needs to be.”

East let out a long-suffering groan. “This is all so nauseatingly *nice*. Aren’t you at least a little bit annoyed he prefers your dad’s dick over your—”

Before East could finish, Daire gave his shoulder a hard shove, sending him tumbling off the counter.

“What the fuck, man?”

Daire rested against the vacated spot. “You were in my way.”

I took that as my cue to lead Serena away from the nosy assholes and over to the wide wall of panoramic windows overlooking Manhattan.

"Thanks for coming and helping out tonight," I said.

"You don't need to thank me. The second you said you and the guys were helping Gavin move, I knew you'd be down one."

I smiled at her as we both said, "East," and laughed.

"I'm surprised he even showed, to be honest," I said.

"He wouldn't have missed out on the opportunity to boss us around or be an utter dick."

"That's true."

Silence fell between us then, and before it could grow and get weird, I asked, "What the guys said back there… Are we—are you—good?"

Serena smiled. "We're good, I promise. It was a little tough at first to wrap my head around, but I'm good now."

"Are you sure? I would understand if—"

"Preston. I'm sure. In fact, I wanted to ask how your, um, weekend was? Not all the details or anything, but how was the Plaza?"

I blinked, going still at the mention of our weekend retreat. "Uh, how did you know about that?"

"A pipe in my apartment busted, and me and the girls kind of took over Dad's house. He couldn't really handle more than one night of Victoria hitting on him, so when he said he was going to get a room at the Plaza… Well. I figured he might invite you."

Heat burned my cheeks just from thinking about what we'd done on our little getaway, and I looked down at my feet so she wouldn't notice.

But she did. Of course she did.

"Are you blushing?" she said, maneuvering her body to block the guys' view of me. What was it about Carringtons that had me turning several shades of red around them?

"I'm, ah… It was nice."

"Blushing *and* stammering. If I didn't know better, I'd think you were falling in looooove."

As I stood there trying to think of a response that made any kind of sense, Serena moved in closer and put her hand on my arm.

"Oh my God. You like him. Like, *really* like him."

I swallowed around the sudden lump in my throat, not about to lie to her now. Not when there was finally nothing but truth between us.

“Wow.” She rubbed my arm and squeezed my bicep. “Hey, that’s great. I love you both. I just didn’t realize it was that serious.”

“I… Well, he doesn’t know I feel that, um. You know, *that* strongly. I mean, I don’t think he does.”

Serena nodded, the understanding in her eyes much more than I ever could’ve asked or hoped for. “Maybe you should tell him. That’s kind of important, don’t you think? Being on the same page?”

“I can’t tell him that. We’re just having fun. He’s Archer Carrington, and I’m just…”

“Just what? Because I’ve got to say, I’ve never seen my dad act the way he’s been acting lately.”

That had me feeling some kind of way, but it didn’t mean there was a future for us. I was still in the closet, for God’s sake, and he was this accomplished, well-respected guy who could have anyone he wanted. I… was still in college. I wasn’t exactly a good bet.

“I appreciate that, but we’re just seeing how this goes,” I said. I didn’t need to point out all my faults—she already knew them.

Her expression softened. “Okay, well, just be careful. I’m here if you need me.”

“Just not for the dirty details.”

“*Especially* not for the dirty details. That’s what you’ve got these morons for.”

A laugh escaped my throat. “Yes, I do.”

“Speaking of your morons, think they’d be up for drinks outside of Daire’s dungeon of doom?” She waggled her brows as she took my hand, pulling me back to the crowd in the kitchen.

“Hmm, let me think. If it’s between staying here and helping a miserable Gavin unpack or hitting up a club, I’m pretty sure they can be convinced.”

“And you, Mr. Abernathy? Can you be convinced, or do you have, uh… somewhere else to be?”

There she went again, with her teasing eyes and that knowing stare. “I think tonight I’m going to hang out with my best friend.”

“Damn right you are.” She turned around just as we reached the kitchen and aimed a look at the guys now staring at her. “All right, boys, go put on your sluttiest outfits. We’re gonna get East laid tonight.”

Yep, that’s my girl.

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TWENTY-NINE

archer

“AH, IF NOT the office, then the Elysium, if not the Elysium, then the office. And around we go.”

Benoit made quite the entrance as he leaned against the doorway in a long, oversized fur jacket that I was hoping was faux, but with him, I never knew. Whatever it was, it wasn’t exactly the right attire for helping out with the final touches for the Winter Ball taking place this weekend.

As it was, we were at capacity with volunteers anyway, which was why I’d told Preston he didn’t have to force his friends to help out. Not that I didn’t want to see him, but with three days until the event, I couldn’t lose focus, and Preston was the ultimate distraction. Benoit and his social agenda came a distant second.

I shook my head at my friend as I checked a delivery of crystal glasses and pointed them in the direction of the dining manager for drop-off. “Yet somehow you always manage to make an appearance. You must be bored, because I know you didn’t come here to help.”

“I don’t mind getting my hands dirty for charity,” he said, kicking up his chin. “Ruining my outfit for my ungrateful peers is where I draw the line.”

I eyed his coat again before looking back at my checklist. “Yes, God forbid you do that. What a tragedy.”

“Exactly. And the fact that you know my hard and soft limits is why I’m here.”

“Limits? This is starting to sound like a conversation we should be having in private. Preferably over drinks.”

“*Mon ami*, if I thought you had time for a Manhattan, I wouldn’t be standing here, begging for your help.”

“This is what you consider begging? Your partners must be so disappointed.”

He swept a hand over the fur covering his chest, stroking it. “I’d never leave an encounter anything other than completely satisfied, which, I admit, is the dilemma that’s brought me to you tonight.”

“And that is?”

“Well, a former paramour of mine has arrived in the city for several days. Completely unexpected, of course—you know I’d never plan these things.”

“No, never.”

“And while I don’t usually encumber myself with anything complicated like a night of passion that stretches into several long, tangled-in-the-sheets days—”

“That’s unfortunate.”

“—I must admit that the sex was so good I’m tempted to let him join me for an encore.”

Of all the times she could’ve walked up, the dining manager chose that one, and her wide eyes as she looked between the two of us would’ve been funny if it wasn’t so damn unprofessional.

“Uh, I’ll come back,” she said, rushing back off to the kitchen.

Benoit didn’t look the least bit self-conscious as I pinned him with a sharp look.

“You really couldn’t have called to ask me that?”

“No. You know as well as I do you wouldn’t answer in the midst of all…this.” He gestured at the chaos around us and wrinkled his nose. “So here I am.”

I rubbed my forehead and gestured toward the door, not wanting anyone else to be subjected to whatever came out of his mouth next. “Walk with me.”

Benoit didn’t have the best timing, but, needing to check on the lighting crew anyway, I could give him a couple of minutes on my way for this…“emergency.”

As I stepped out into the hall, I had to flatten myself against the wall to dodge a couple of volunteers carrying a ladder, and luckily Benoit caught himself just in time, or that precious coat would’ve been impaled.

Once they passed, I looked around, making sure the coast was clear. “All right,” I said. “What’s the problem?”

“Well, if I allow him to enjoy me tomorrow, I highly doubt he’d let me go for several days. I imagine at least through the weekend. And, as you know, that’s a problem because—”

“You’re trying to get out of attending the Winter Ball.”

Benoit put a hand over his heart. “After all the work you’ve done? I’d be a horrible friend.”

“The worst,” I said, biting back a grin. I knew exactly what he was after, but I wanted to make him sweat a little.

“Right. I suppose I’ll just have to bring him along as a”—he waved his hand, like he couldn’t get the word out—“person who attends with another person.”

Leave it to Benoit to be unable to call a date exactly what it was.

“I appreciate that you want to attend *so* badly, but I’m afraid I can’t let you bring a guest.”

“No?”

“You see, you didn’t mark your RSVP with a plus-one. We’ve already printed the place cards, submitted meal preferences, and done security checks on the guestlist, and it can’t be changed this last minute. I guess you’ll have to sit this one out.”

“But *mon ami*, I couldn’t possibly—”

“Benny, you’re uninvited,” I said, giving him the out he needed. “It’s fine. Go enjoy all the sex.”

“But—”

“No buts. I’ll have enough to deal with that night to worry about your sneaking in a date or moping about the bed you could’ve been in. I mean it.”

The crease between Benoit’s brows smoothed out and he smiled. “Well, if you insist.”

“I do. Now you can go back to more important things, like prepping your ass for an epic weekend.”

I clapped him on the shoulder and started to walk away, but he caught me by the arm.

“Not so fast. You haven’t told me what you’ve decided about *your* little dilemma yet. I’ll admit I’m a little hurt you haven’t asked for *my* advice in return, but—”

“What are you talking about?”

“Your pretty young thing, of course. The one you just spent a naughty weekend getaway with—”

Nearby, a passing group of workers burst into laughter, and I jerked my head in their direction, thinking they’d been listening in. It didn’t *seem* like they were paying us any attention, but that didn’t give me a sense of relief.

“Shit, come on,” I said, and made a split-second decision to get us out of earshot of anyone. It was one thing for someone to hear about *his* extracurricular activities; it was another to hear about mine.

I veered toward the right to the elevator and punched the button. When the doors opened immediately, I stepped inside, Benoit hot on my heels.

“The roof?” He arched a brow at the destination I’d pressed. “You do know it’s freezing out.”

“Aren’t you wearing a pack of rabbits? You’ll be fine.”

He gasped. “How dare you? Armani stopped using real fur in twenty-sixteen.”

“Well, that’s one less thing for me to worry about. My friend being a murderer.”

“Promiscuous, yes. Murderer, no.”

As the doors opened onto the roof, he stuck to the back wall, and I had to grab him by the lapel and practically drag him out. It *was* cold up here, especially wearing only a thin button-down with sleeves I’d rolled up my forearms. The view was undeniable, though, so breathtakingly gorgeous that I didn’t mind a little frostbite.

“We’re up here so you can tell me the delicious things you and pretty young thing did in private, yes?” The mischievous glint in Benoit’s eyes was evident with the city lights reflected in them.

“No. Unlike some, I don’t kiss and then tell every little detail.”

He pouted. “Well, what about *some* of the details?”

“I don’t know. Maybe another time. When I’m not drowning in deadlines and surrounded by a building full of people needing my attention,” I said pointedly.

“*You’re* the one who dragged me onto the roof. I just assumed you wanted to tell me what a bad boy you’ve been.”

No way in hell was I going to tell him just *how* bad. “Look, I just don’t need anyone to overhear your big mouth, that’s all.”

Holding his coat closed, he shrugged and strolled past me. “All the better to suck cock with, my dear.”

Thank God no one was listening in on *that*.

“All right, fine,” I said, shoving my hands in my pockets to keep them warm. I thought about Preston, about all the things I could say. “You want me to give you something, how about this: I think I could actually really like him, and that scares me to death.”

To his credit, Benoit didn’t give away any surprise at my admission. He only stared at me for a long moment before finally shaking his head. “Oh no.”

“What?”

“Darling Archer. There’s no ‘could’ happening here. You like him.”

“No, I…” I swallowed hard, the denial unable to get its way past my throat. It was too easy to see what could happen here, because the truth was, the time I spent with Preston didn’t have me just living in the moment. It had me thinking a few steps into the future, imagining what that might be like. To have him in my bed at night, to wake up to him in the morning. To not have to hide if we wanted to walk down the street or if he dragged me back to an ice rink.

It couldn’t happen, of course. Not with who he was, not with who I was, and not with the complication that was his public relationship with my daughter.

“I’m setting myself up for disaster,” I said, and then met Benoit’s eyes. “Aren’t I?”

He gave me a tight smile full of sympathy. “I think you already have.”

I let that sink in, feeling the unease settle in my stomach.

I liked Preston. A lot. I didn’t need weeks or months or years to tell me that. Even if I’d never looked at him the way I did now, I knew his heart. I knew what a good guy he was, only now I had the bonus of seeing all the other sides of him I’d never known existed. And it all made him damn near irresistible.

Preston. A guy who wasn’t even born when I started college.

Fuck me.

“I don’t understand how I’ve let this happen,” I said, pacing. “He’s not out, not even to his parents. How the hell did I think fooling around with him was a good idea?”

“Fooling around is always a good idea,” Benoit said, before dropping his gaze below my hips. “But you’re supposed to be thinking with your dick, not that useless organ beating in your chest. That was your mistake. You know this.”

“It’s not like I don’t know how to keep things casual. That’s all I’ve been doing for months.”

“You could cut things off now.” When I snapped my head in his direction, he lifted a shoulder. “I mean, what’s the alternative?”

I had literally no idea. That didn’t stop Benoit from rambling on.

“How did he take the news about your bringing a date Saturday? Because, trust me, those young ones can be extraordinarily jealous.”

A date on Saturday? To the Winter Ball? I frowned. “What did you say?”

“I said, even if he says he’s okay with it, once he sees you with someone else, he won’t be so accommodating. I’d expect fireworks if I were you.”

I blinked, wondering what the hell he was talking about, until it hit me out of nowhere.

Jesus Christ, Benoit was right. I *had* asked someone to join me as my date, weeks ago. I’d completely forgotten about it with everything going on. Rodney was the cousin of a legacy member, someone I’d met at another event, and we’d hit it off. He lived too far away for us to see each other regularly, but when he mentioned being in town to visit family during this weekend’s festivities, I’d offered for him to join me. Not so much as a romantic date, though who knew what he considered it as, but to have someone fun by my side on what could be a stressful night.

I hadn’t dreamed Preston would ever be involved in this scenario.

No wonder I had a couple missed calls from Rodney earlier today. He’d probably wanted to touch base. About our *date*.

Fuck me to hell.

“Preston doesn’t know, does he?” Benoit mused, tapping his lips. “Because you’ve been off having mind-blowing orgasms that knocked that bit of information right out of your head.”

“Dammit,” I said, running a hand over my face as I began to walk the length of the roof. Regardless of whatever we were or weren’t, I couldn’t see Preston taking this well. Hell, *I* wasn’t taking this well.

“What was his name? The guy?” Benoit let out an exaggerated sigh, and his breath came out in a white cloud. “So many men in this city. I can’t keep

up. At least this one's age appropriate."

"Shut up." He wasn't wrong, though. "I'll just have to call Rodney and get out of it."

He snorted out a laugh. "Really? And what will that sound like? 'Sorry, Rodney dear, my college boy toy who'll be at the party with my daughter won't like it if I bring you'?"

He was right. That sounded fucking ridiculous out loud, but bringing someone was the last thing I wanted to do.

"You said it yourself—all the place cards and security checks are done. How will it look if the president of the Elysium has an empty chair beside his at the event?" Benoit tsked as I glared at him. Not because he was saying anything I didn't already know to be true, but because I was pissed off at myself.

I stopped pacing, resting my hands low on my hips. "I'll have to tell Preston tomorrow, I guess."

"Why not tonight?"

"Because I'll be here late, and it's not something I want to do over the phone." It would be easier to convince him this date wasn't a big deal if I could do it in person and he could see my face.

"Well, good luck with your PYT, darling. And don't say I didn't warn you." Benoit grinned and then made an explosive motion with his fingers. "*Fireworks*."

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THIRTY

preston

“IT’S COLDER THAN a witch’s tit out here this morning.”

I glanced past our group of bundled-up friends to where Travis was shoving his hands in the pockets of his ripped jeans as we headed through the gates of Astor.

The snow was falling pretty hard this morning, but despite the frigid forecast, Travis had opted, as always, for looking good over feeling good. In other words, he was freezing his ass off right now in black designer jeans and a sheer rocker-esque shirt, and the only thing that looked remotely warm was the scarf he’d wound around his neck—all in the name of “fashion,” of course. Hell, he should’ve gone with Donovan to the shoot he had this morning—it was for some new, edgy brand that wanted him and Kelly to represent them. Travis would’ve fit right in.

“You have such a way with words,” West joked. “Maybe you should come with me and JT to next week’s poetry slam.”

Travis screwed his nose up. “Yeah, how about…no. The last thing I want to be is a third wheel in a room full of sappy poets.”

JT looked around his boyfriend’s shoulder. “You’d be surprised. Most of the poems on slam night are full of outrage over injustices and—”

“People who think shouting out their problems on a stage will change the world?” East rolled his eyes. “Let’s not forget they’re doing it all for a cash prize.”

JT looked at East—JT’s least favorite person after he learned East had bet West to date him. Even if it had all worked out in the end.

“They do it to send a message. To have their voices heard. The prize is just an incentive for people who might be—”

“In it for the money? Come on, Golden Boy, if these people were really so impassioned, they’d be chaining themselves to a tree on Wednesday nights or camping outside city hall. Not standing up on a stage for a couple of Benjamins.”

JT shook his head. “You’re such an asshole.”

“And you’re such a Pollyanna.”

“Okay, okay.” I put my hands up between all of them. “How about we just agree that Travis shouldn’t go anywhere near a poetry stage, for the sake of the craft?”

“Or you could all just shut the fuck up, ’cause no one cares.” Daire tossed his cigarette butt to the ground and crushed it with his heel, much like I suspected he wanted to squash the conversation.

“So eloquent, as always, Daire. Perhaps *you* should attend the poetry slam. You’re full of outrage. Or is it just rage?” East jogged up the steps to the main door, where a younger classman automatically opened it for him—or us, I supposed.

The group filed in one after another, Serena and I the last to make our way through.

“Thanks.” I smiled at the fresh-faced kid, a first year for sure, who immediately looked away and mumbled, “No problem.”

It was well known around campus who we were and what families we belonged to. The Park Avenue Princes had a reputation to maintain and came from a long line of legacies that preceded them. So whenever someone had the chance to get in our good graces, they would take it, whether it was through opening a door or bringing us our morning breakfast. It’d been that way for years.

Did I think it was particularly fair? No. Was it the way it was? Yes.

That didn’t mean we couldn’t acknowledge them or be polite.

We walked down the main hall toward our private hangout, a room our group had commandeered and designated as our own the first year we were at Astor. Classes weren’t due to start for another fifteen minutes, but this way we could fuel up on caffeine and food—and catch up on any gossip we might’ve missed.

Hushed voices and curious eyes always seemed to follow our movements as we made our way through the bustle of students on their way

to class or the coffee carts and breakfast stands around campus.

Nothing seemed out of the ordinary until we got close to a crowd we knew relatively well through Gavin's boyfriend, Joey. We'd hung out with them here and there, and it had been cordial enough—but lately they'd been mostly MIA.

They were huddled close, several girls and guys, and as we approached, it was like they shared some kind of silent message amongst one another, because each and every one of them turned in our direction.

"Fuckin' hell." Travis's words mirrored every single one of our reactions as we all got a good look at Joey and the twisted direction of his nose, and a right eye that was the same gruesome shade of purplish black that *Daire's* was.

Oh fuck. This was not going to end well.

I turned to Gavin, whose eyes had been glued to his phone all morning, and was about to lead him away from the shitshow that was about to go down when he all but ran into a frozen Travis.

As silence descended in the hall, Gavin looked up from his phone. When he spotted Joey, and the crowd tightening around him like a defensive move in some kind of battle, he loudly gasped.

Great. This was just fucking great.

"Joey?" Gavin's voice was barely audible as he stepped away from our group. "What happened to you?"

An ugly twist of the lips made Joey's swollen face even more gnarled. "You know exactly what."

Gavin shook his head, walking further away from us and closer to the rabid dogs straining at their leash. "I… No. What are you—"

"Save it, slut," one of Joey's minions snarled, as Joey's eyes shifted past Gavin's shoulder to our very own rabid animal, and Daire looked ready to kill. "We know you sent him."

Gavin spun on our group, his pale eyes looking as though they were about to flash a bolt of lightning in Daire's direction. "*You* did this?"

Shit. Here I'd been worried that all hell was going to break loose between us and Joey's crowd, but the anger swirling in the hall had suddenly shifted. The rage was now vibrating between Gavin and Daire.

"He—"

"*Did* you do this?" Gavin demanded, louder than I'd ever heard him speak, and Daire's mouth clamped shut. "Un-fucking-believable."

Gavin shoved past us, and I reached for him, but before I could offer any kind of advice—don't ask me what—he was toe to toe with Daire and seething.

"You promised."

The contrast between dark and light had never been more apparent as Daire glared down into Gavin's pale face, his dark eyes giving nothing away.

"I lied."

Gavin shoved him in the chest so hard that Daire stumbled back several steps, but he did nothing to retaliate. He merely angled his chin up in stony defiance as Gavin stormed past him and down the hall without a backward glance.

When we turned back to the group behind us, it was to see a vicious slash curling Joey's lips as he eyed Daire.

"Good luck fucking him now."

Daire muscled forward, but luckily Travis and West were there to hold him back as East stepped out.

"How about you go crawl back into whatever hole Gavin dug you out of for the few months he was bored? Or, if you like, I could have someone dig it for you."

"You threatening me?"

"No…" East flashed a killer smile their way. "I'd never be so obvious."

"Fucking pricks," someone in the group hissed.

"Yes," East agreed, nose in the air, pompous as can be. "Park *Avenue* Pricks. A lot of fucking comes with the territory, something I'm sure you have to beg or pay for. Now, if we're done here—"

"Mr. *Easton* has a paper to rewrite, if he wants a chance of passing my class next semester."

My mouth fell open as Serena and I turned to see Zac Fletcher making his way past our group to East, and Joey and his crowd scattered.

"*Your* class?" In true East form, not even the new teacher's assistant to his strictest professor, King, could rattle him. He gave Zac a typical East once-over, and from his unimpressed expression it was clear to everyone how lacking he found the black jeans, grey V-neck shirt, and sports jacket ensemble Zac wore.

Not that it seemed to bother Zac. He merely walked up to East and slapped the papers he held against East's chest.

“As far as you’re concerned, it is. This is a failed paper. So if you want to spend time with your little friends here somewhere warm over the winter break, you’re going to want to get to class. Now.”

I looked over Serena’s head to see West’s eyes were wide as saucers. No one talked to East the way Zac was, especially in public.

“I can’t look away,” Serena whispered by my ear, and I knew the feeling. It was like watching a train wreck. You knew the crash would be catastrophic, but there was no way to stop it, so you just stood by and watched.

East arched a brow and didn’t even bother looking at the papers now glued to his chest.

“If you think for one second I will be spending my winter break anywhere near this city, you don’t know who you’re talking to. Failed paper or not.”

East went to step around Zac but was stopped by a hand on his arm. He eyed it like one would a peasant touching royalty, but Zac didn’t miss a beat.

“And if *you* think for one second your money is going to get you out of this, then you don’t know who *you’re* talking to. My classroom, James, now.”

East looked to the rest of us and no doubt saw us gawking at him like a bunch of busybodies with our eyes wide and jaws on the floor. But it wasn’t every day someone put James Easton in his place. Moreover, it wasn’t every day he let someone get away with it. There was a first time for everything, though.

East narrowed his eyes like a snake homing in on its prey, and I hoped to god Zac knew what he’d just provoked, as East yanked his arm free and turned until he was practically nose to nose with the brave—or stupid; jury was still out—TA.

“You touch me again, and I *will* report you.”

We all held our breath, waiting for the threat to land, but the only indication that East had struck a nerve was the slight twitch in Zac’s angular jaw line as he leaned in even closer and said, “No, you won’t. Now get to class.”

East’s nostrils flared, and just when I thought he’d throw out something to cut Zac off at his knees, he started off down the hall—shoulders straight,

head held high, the distinct scent of revenge lingering his wake—as Zac kept watch behind him.

“Fuck me.” Travis blew out a breath. “I don’t know about you guys, but I need a goddamn drink.”

No kidding. We’d barely set foot in the place and it felt as though it had just imploded on us.

I turned to what was left of our friends to see West hugging JT into his side and Travis shaking his head.

“You think we should call Van, tell him about Gavin?”

Travis shrugged. “I don’t know, man. Gavin looked pretty pissed that Daire had stuck his nose—or fist—in his business. I’d leave it if I were you. He’ll tell him if he wants to.”

Serena nodded. “I have to agree. It definitely looked like he wanted some space.”

“Yeah.” West snorted. “From the person he just moved in with.”

“You’re right,” I said. “I just thought that if he was going through a breakup he might want to talk about it—”

Travis hiked his bag up his shoulder. “Personally, I’d just want to get shit-faced drunk and forget all about that person.”

“Oh yeah.” I eyed him as he started to scroll through his phone. “How’s that working for you? Caleb *do* anything interesting last night?”

The scowl Travis threw my way should’ve had the floor opening up under me.

“I don’t know, did Zaddy Carrington?”

“I don’t know, I haven’t seen him.”

Serena scrunched her nose up. “You guys promised no details. That includes nicknames.”

“Sorry,” I said “Ignore Travis. He’s just touchy—”

“Because he’s not being touched,” West interjected, and Travis glared at all of us.

“Yeah, well, that’s going to change this weekend.”

“You have a date?” JT’s smile was bright and full of enthusiasm, like he thought Travis might finally find the love of his life if he went on a date.

I had a feeling that Travis was just trying to find dick.

“Well, I’m not showing up to a Winter Ball on my own lookin’ like some loser.”

“You wouldn’t be on your own.” Serena rubbed his arm. “You’d be with us.”

“You and your ‘boyfriend’ over there?” Travis eyed the two of us. “Are you even going together, or did your dad steal your date?”

“Hilarious.” Serena’s voice was droll but unaffected as she cuddled into my side and looked up at me. “We are still going together, aren’t we? I didn’t even think to ask. But Dad’s going with Rodney, so it shouldn’t be a problem, right?”

Wait a second. Did she just say—

“Arch—your dad’s taking someone to the ball?”

I could feel the blood draining from my face as my stomach began to twist. The happy little flips I’d been feeling whenever I thought about Archer were now churning into a ball of knots.

“Uh oh…” Travis chuckled. “Looks like Preston’s the one who won’t be getting touched.”

I shot a glare in his direction, Serena’s words still playing on a loop in my head as I tried to recall Archer mentioning anything about a date for the Winter Ball. But no, there was nothing. If anything, he’d spent time telling me all the reasons why he *didn’t* date.

How convenient that he’d left this part out.

“Oh God.” Serena bit down on her lip, worry swirling in her eyes. “You didn’t know.”

My heart was racing a mile a minute as I tried to squash down the irrational feelings of hurt and jealousy bubbling up inside of me.

What had I expected? Archer to show up solo? For him to sit across from me and pine for me, the way I would him? How naïve could I get? But the idea of watching Archer wine and dine another man while I was across the room, unable to touch him, made me want to both throw up and punch something.

“No. I didn’t.”

“Yeah,” West said as he cautiously backed him and JT away from us. “We’re going to head to class now.”

Travis pointed at them and nodded. “And I’m gonna go with.”

I couldn’t blame them. I wouldn’t want to be around me right then either. I felt like an idiot. Like some stupid, lovesick, overeager kid who’d built up this fantasy in my head where someone as charismatic and

sophisticated as Archer Carrington could possibly want more with me than a couple nights in his bed.

How stupid was I?

"Preston?" Serena's voice was soft, like she was trying to soothe me. But it was too late. My insecurities had already taken over.

"Can you give me a minute?" I fished my phone out of my pocket and held up my cell. "I just want to—"

She nodded, squeezing my arm. "Take your time. I'll wait for you over here."

I took in a breath, trying to calm the riot of emotions wreaking havoc on my mind, and walked to one of the windows looking out over Astor's main courtyard.

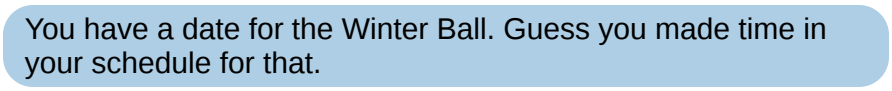
Was I kidding myself to think that Archer and I could have any kind of real relationship? I was still in college, for God's sake. He was out running a multimillion-dollar company.

But…he'd been amazing this weekend. So sexy and attentive, funny and smart, the best date I ever had—and now all I could think was: would Rodney feel the same way?

I tightened my hand around my phone, the green-eyed monster rearing its ugly head—and how odd it was over something as simple as date after what we'd done this weekend with Raul and Johan.

Somehow, though, this felt more personal. Not only the thought of his spending time with someone else, but the fact he didn't tell me? It hurt.

I stared down at the screen and pulled up a message thread with FILTH, his nickname now mocking me.



Then, before I could talk myself out of it, I hit send.

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THIRTY-ONE

archer

PRESTON WASN'T RETURNING my texts. Or my calls.

That they weren't going directly to voicemail meant his phone was on, but he was *choosing* to ignore me, and that was something I wouldn't let slide.

Even if it was my fault he was obviously upset.

I yanked open the main door of Astor University with more force than necessary, pissed at myself that I'd put us both in this situation. Until Benoit brought it up last night, I'd completely forgotten about Rodney, and by the time I left the Elysium, it was well after midnight. Waking Preston up to share that bit of information was the last thing I'd wanted to do, but had I known the way it would blow up this morning, I would've done it anyway.

How had he even found out?

A security guard started in my direction as I made my way deep into the school, but then stopped and waved when he saw it was me. Being on the board of directors here wasn't usually filled with any perks, but the freedom to walk in without being harassed was one of them, at least this morning.

Though what I was doing here was beyond all rational thought. Then again, I'd lost all common sense the second I touched Preston. What was racking up one more sin on my ever-growing list?

I checked the time as I headed in the direction of his current class—information, I was ashamed to note, I'd learned from Serena when Preston didn't answer me back. I hated that she was involved in this already, which was just one reason why I should never have let this happen.

But it had. Because I could finally admit to myself that maybe I was enjoying Preston's company a little too much.

No communication, though? Not having it. I'd canceled a meeting and headed straight here, something that had surprised my assistant more than it had me. I didn't rush out of work unless there was an emergency, so what the hell was I doing here? Why couldn't I have waited until the end of the workday like a normal human being?

The sick feeling in my stomach was why. The same feeling I'd had last night on the roof when I realized I'd fucked up by forgetting a pretty crucial detail. If Preston was feeling half of what I was, then I couldn't let him spend hours beating himself up and cursing me to hell. He'd only get more pissed the longer the day went on. Hell, so would I.

Class was still in session for a few more minutes when I found his room number, and rather than make a scene, I waited outside the door.

If Benoit could see me now…

He'd give me so much shit. I'd have to conveniently leave this part out the next time we gossiped over drinks, otherwise I'd never hear the end of it.

I leaned back against the wall and crossed my arms, waiting out the time as patiently as I could manage. When the door opened suddenly, an onslaught of students appeared, and I straightened, feeling a rush of determination to fix what I'd inadvertently messed up.

The hall became crowded in a matter of seconds, but still Preston didn't walk out the door.

Had he left for the day? Or worse, headed to my office?

Fuck it. I peered inside the lecture hall, where most of the students had already filed out—except for one.

Preston stood at the bottom of the stairs, nodding at something his professor was saying. I could only see the back of him, but it was just as beautiful and immaculate as the rest of him—camel-colored slacks, a wine-red ribbed sweater over a plaid button-down, his sleeves rolled up at the wrists. He filled out those preppy clothes with an understated sex appeal that made my cock ache.

Good, so he hasn't left. I continued to watch, not wanting to interrupt and call his professor's attention to me if I could help it. The second the older man walked toward a different exit and disappeared, I stepped into the doorway. Preston hadn't noticed me yet as he shifted his bag onto his

shoulder and headed up the stairs, but it didn't take long before he looked up and his steps faltered. His whole body tensed, and there was no mistaking the look on his face—he wasn't happy to see me. I knew right then it'd been a good idea to not put this off.

"What are you doing here?" he bit out.

"You're not answering your phone."

"So?"

"So we need to talk."

He scoffed and shook his head, continuing up the stairs. I could tell he had every intention of walking out that door, so I reached behind me, pulling it shut.

He stopped, looking between me and the exit.

"The time for talking was before I found out you were seeing other people. For some reason, I was under the impression that while we were fucking, there wouldn't be anyone else—Oh, wait. We *did* say that."

"I'm not seeing anyone else, and I sure as hell don't have the time or desire to fuck anyone else."

Preston narrowed his eyes. "But you made the time to come interrupt my day? It seems your priorities are backward, Mr. Carrington."

He started up the stairs again, but I moved to the side, blocking him.

"Let me by," he said flatly.

"No."

"I'll be late for my next class. Isn't that one of your rules? No skipping school if I want the chance to be with you?" Sarcasm dripped from his tongue, and he rolled his eyes before moving to the side to pass me, but I was quicker, blocking him again.

"You don't have a class."

Preston angled back from me, narrowing his eyes. He was perceptive. Yes, that was one of the many attributes I was coming to admire about him. I'd just shown my hand and given him the upper one.

"You spoke to Serena?"

"Since you wouldn't take my calls, that seemed like the best way to track you down."

"Seems pretty underhanded, if you ask me."

"Yeah, well, you weren't answering me. So if going to my daughter to get your schedule is the only way to find you, then you can bet your ass I'm going to do it."

“Don’t need to bet for it, Archer.” He leaned in close and whispered, “You already had it. Or did you forget?”

He went to push past me a third time, but I still wasn’t having it. I took hold of his arm and yanked him in close. “Oh, I didn’t forget, but you seemed to. It seems the only time you listen to me is when you’re naked in my bed.”

Preston’s pupils darkened, but when someone shouted out in the hall, the two of us jumped apart.

“You shouldn’t have come here. I was pretty clear I don’t want to talk.” Preston started up the stairs again.

“That’s too bad.” I followed him, taking the steps two at a time, and just as he was about to open the door, I slapped my hand on top of it. “Because I do.”

This was insane. *I* was fucking insane. To be standing in one of Astor’s classrooms, pinning a student to the door. I felt like I was the one back in university, and my body was reacting the same way.

“I’m not letting you leave, Preston. Not until we talk.”

Preston spun around then, his cheeks flushed as he fumed at me. “Okay, then talk. Tell me how in the several days we were staying at the Plaza, fucking, eating, talking, and fucking a little more, you managed to forget the fact that you have a date with someone else *this* weekend. Can you tell me that?”

When he said it like that, I sounded like an even bigger shit.

“Or maybe I fucked you too much. Made you brain dead?”

He was on a roll now, all the anger and hurt he’d been feeling finally boiling over. Did I deserve it? Yes. Was I going to put up with it much longer? No. I was not.

“Keep pushing, Preston,” I warned, and he narrowed his eyes.

“I’m not pushing, I’m talking. Isn’t that what you wanted?”

“Yes, but like adu—” I cut my words off, but not quick enough—the fire in his eyes reignited.

“Like adults? Is that what you were going to say?” He scoffed. “*I’m* not the one who tracked you down and pinned you to a door in the middle of the day.”

“Preston—”

“So, Rodney… Does he kiss as good as me?”

“How would I know? This is our first date.”

“Oh, so it *is* a date?”

“No.” I shook my head, praying for patience. “It was planned before you and I were—”

“Fucking? About that—do you think he’d let you fuck him in front of two other men? If not, I say it’s a downgrade. But hey, maybe you got your kicks with a young guy and are done with me now.”

Before I even knew I was going to, I shoved a leg between Preston’s and ground my body up against his. My stiff cock was a testament to the fact that I definitely wasn’t done with him. And his thick hard-on was proof he wasn’t done with me.

I lowered my head to the crook of his neck and inhaled. “Does that *feel* like I’m done with you?”

Preston’s head fell back against the door as our bodies collided. I wrapped my free arm around his waist to haul him even closer, then kissed my way up to his ear.

“With the way I’m feeling, I’ll never be fucking done with you.”

I slammed my mouth down on his, and he didn’t resist or push me away. His tongue was as starved for a taste of me as mine was, and he clenched my shirt, holding me tight to him.

All the anger and fire we’d both been feeling poured out into the kiss, turning it into a frenzied meeting of the mouths that had me forgetting where I was. I could only focus on making him shut up long enough to understand he was the one I wanted, no matter what was rational.

With one arm still around his waist, I reached up to his jaw, angling it so I could suck on his tongue. An acerbic mouth like his shouldn’t taste so sweet, but it did, and I devoured him like I’d never get the chance again.

The hand he fisted in my shirt pushed me away suddenly, ripping our mouths apart.

We were both breathing heavy as his gaze darted past me to the other door.

“We can’t,” he said, straightening off the door and forcing me to take a step back. “Not here.”

The fog lifted as I looked around the empty—for now—classroom, and I cursed.

“You know what? You really do make me brain dead.”

Preston tugged at his pullover, smoothing it back into place, and then picked up the bag he’d dropped when I reached for him. As he shouldered

it, he schooled his expression.

Gone was the fury, as well as the lust that had temporarily taken over.

In its place was the mask of resignation, like he was slipping back into a role he was all too familiar with.

“You should go before anyone knows you’re here.”

“Preston.” I sighed. “I’m sorry. I should’ve told you—”

“No, you don’t need to apologize. I’m the one who’s sorry. Everything’s happened so fast and been so amazing, and when I heard about Rodney I just felt...stupid.”

“You’ve got nothing to feel stupid about. It was my mistake. I should’ve called you last night, but I wanted to tell you in person.”

“It doesn’t matter. What can we do?” He gave me a sad smile. “I’m going with Serena. Even if you were going without a date, it’s not like we could be together, right?”

I nodded reluctantly. “Right.”

“Just…don’t fall in love with him or anything.” He tried for a teasing tone, but I could hear the truth in his words.

I moved to cup his face, just to touch him one more time, but the door behind him jerked open suddenly, and I dropped my arm.

“Carrington.” Professor Tyrone Kingston looked at me in surprise, clearly not expecting to see me standing on the stairs of the lecture hall. It wasn’t until his gaze traveled to Preston that a furrow formed between his brows.

“Just finalizing everything for the Winter Ball volunteers,” I said smoothly. “I swear, the work never ends.”

“You couldn’t pay me enough to do that job.” King looked between the two of us again, his eyes seeing a little too much, as always, before coming back to land on me. “You’re a saint.”

Ha. All three of us knew what a lie that was. But I wasn’t about to stick around and make this any harder on Preston. As it was, he looked like he was going to pass out.

I gave a curt nod to King, then waved at Preston. “Right, so I’ll see you Saturday?”

Preston nodded like some kind of robot, his Adam’s apple bobbing like it was in a barrel of water. “Yes, Mr. Carrington. Of course.”

Jesus, the way those words affected me should’ve been a crime. I stepped around him and then past King, whose lips twitched as if he were

biting back a smile.

"Have a good day, Archer."

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THIRTY-TWO

preston

THANK GOD FOR Serena. She always knew how to keep my mind off whatever I was worried or upset about by distracting me with a good time. And after the run-in with Archer yesterday, I needed it.

Normally, I wouldn't dare be anywhere near her and her friends while they were getting ready. They were a wild bunch, running around half-naked, singing and dancing, gossiping while doing their hair and makeup. It wasn't a scene any guy should witness, yet there I'd been, invited to be a part of the madness of their hours-long Winter Ball preparations.

I'd shaken my head nonstop at the chaos, but it did what Serena hoped—got me temporarily out of my funk. By the time the limo pulled up to her apartment, I was two drinks in and feeling lighter than I had the last couple days.

As much as I hoped that feeling would stay once we arrived at the Elysium, that I could just relax and enjoy the night without constantly looking over at Archer and his date, the second we were through the press line and made our way inside, the tension crept back in.

"Nope, we're not stressing tonight," Serena said, grabbing both my hands in hers. The orchestra was playing upbeat Christmas songs, and she began to shimmy, her silver dress reflecting the icicle lights hanging from the ceiling with every turn of her hips. "Dance with me."

"Right here? We're not on the dance floor."

"We'll make our own. Maybe we'll inspire some others while we wait."

She lifted my arm, turning herself, and I found it impossible not to finally join in. Her joy was infectious, something I desperately needed,

because the line we were waiting in was the mandatory greeting line with prominent Elysium members. And the person at the head of that line was the president.

Archer.

Or should I say, Archer and his *date*.

I stumbled at the thought, catching myself and giving Serena a tight, apologetic smile. She winked at me and kept dancing, not giving a care when she bumped into Travis behind us.

“Come on, you sexy beast. Dance with us.”

Travis eyed me over her head. “How many drinks has she had?”

“Only one,” I said, twirling her around. “This is her in her most natural state.”

He wrinkled his nose and ran a hand down the lapel of his steampunk-inspired jacket, complete with a tailcoat, a look only he could pull off. “What’s it like to be that…happy?”

I almost answered that I didn’t know, but I caught myself before the words left my tongue. Because I *did* know. I’d felt that fleeting moment of happiness in my time spent with Archer, where my heart felt so full it might burst.

Serena squeezed my hands and nodded behind me. “We’re next.”

Shit. My stomach dropped, and I took a deep breath, steeling myself for what I was about to face.

“He’s got nothing on you,” she murmured, and then stepped past me to greet her dad.

“Trying to start a conga line already?” I heard Archer say as I turned around to join Serena.

Damn, damn, damn. The man stole my breath. He wore a classic black tuxedo that fit his trim body to a T. In that moment, it didn’t feel real that he and I had anything to do with each other. We were on two different levels, like a king greeting his subjects.

I can do this. I can do this. I kept repeating the mantra in my head, hoping like hell I would convince myself it was true before—

“Preston.”

—Archer turned his attention on me.

“Mr. Carrington.” I somehow managed to get his name past my lips as he held a hand out to me, and never had it been so hard to play the role of the fake boyfriend and *perfect* senator’s son.

I slipped my hand into his, and as his fingers wrapped around mine, a jolt of electricity shot between us.

“The place looks amazing.” I looked up at the reindeers overhead, anywhere but at him.

“It does. Thanks largely in part to you.”

My attention came back to him and lingered, and Serena cleared her throat and wrapped her arm through the crook of my elbow.

“You and Preston always make a great team.”

Archer looked to his daughter as he nodded in agreement. “That we do, and may I say, you both look extraordinary tonight.”

“You may.” Serena lifted the edge of her skirt to show it off, and Archer chuckled.

“A modern-day princess.” He leaned in and kissed her cheek, his eyes finding mine. His heated expression let me know, the only way he could, just how extraordinary he found me.

My heart thundered as he straightened to his full height, but when he turned to Rodney and introduced him to Serena, it just about flatlined.

Talk about going from an ultimate high to an all-time low. But I’d known this was coming. I’d been dreading it the whole way here.

“Rodney, this is Preston,” I heard Archer say somewhere in the periphery. “He was the lead volunteer in helping get the Elysium ready for tonight. I couldn’t have done it without him.”

Archer’s words were polite, professional, and about as impersonal as could be, but still that moment of slight praise made me want to throw my arms around him and kiss the living hell out of him.

Man, I had it bad. Reaaally fucking bad.

I moved in front of Rodney and said something that must’ve been deemed appropriate, because he laughed and looked to Archer, who was smiling with him. I needed a goddamn drink.

With a smile plastered on my face and Serena guiding me, I somehow made it through the rest of the line in a manner that pleased my parents, who were at the very end of it. Tonight was already stressful enough—the last thing I needed was for them to chide me for not being everything they’d raised me to be.

So to hear them gush over Serena and compliment me on my work with Mr. Carrington told me they were buying the lie, as always.

Lucky me.

“Hey.” Serena patted my arm as we made our way inside the huge ballroom. “Relax. We made it.”

I knew she meant that in a helpful way, but tonight our deception wasn’t sitting right. My stomach was tied in knots.

“Preston?” Serena led me past a massive ice sculpture that had been delivered this afternoon. But I wasn’t paying attention, my mind full of lies and what-ifs.

“He needs a drink.” Travis rocked up beside us, shaking his head. “Hell, I need a drink after that line. Why do I feel like it’ll be less judgmental trying to pass the pearly gates than getting into the Elysium?”

“You think you’re going through the pearly gates?” Serena grinned.

“Well, I attend Church as often as possible, and when I do, I make sure to get on my knees and…pray.”

“Uh huh.” Serena rolled her eyes. “And now *I* need a drink.”

“Then lead the way,” Travis suggested, hanging back beside me. “I think I saw the rest of the group heading toward the bar anyways.”

Serena started off ahead of us, her beautiful gown easy to keep track of as she made her way through the crowds of people chatting and laughing amongst one another.

Travis fell in step beside me, a thoughtful look on his face. “You okay?”

“Huh?” I hadn’t been paying attention to anything they’d said, but with our being the only two there now, I needed to switch my brain back on.

“You look like you want to throw up.”

With the way my stomach felt, he wasn’t far off.

“That had to be rough back there, seeing him with a date.”

Never had I appreciated the fact more that my friends knew about Archer. That Travis didn’t have to name the *him* in question, because we all knew my big secret, was one less stressor in my life.

I shrugged and let out a sigh. “Not like I can do anything about it.”

“I know. But it still sucks.”

I saw a bone-deep understanding in his eyes that no one else in our group had, and felt the hopelessness more palpable than ever.

God, how did he do it? How did he exist in the same space as the one person he wanted more than anyone else, and not have him? It felt impossible.

These last two days, being near Archer and not knowing what we were to one another, had been torture. I would’ve done anything to be the one

standing beside Archer in that line tonight. I would've sold everything I owned, promised anything in the world—I would've even told my parents the truth…

How did Travis do it?

"Let's get you a drink. It'll help."

I grimaced when we spotted the rest of our group over by the bar laughing. "Okay, as long as East isn't ordering."

SEEING THE ROCKETTES perform a special number for the event was a highlight and, with it being the height of the holiday season, a seemingly impossible feat. Archer had somehow made that happen, though. He could make anything happen.

Stop thinking about him. Don't even look—

My body ignored my brain, turning in the direction I last saw him, searching him out. He wasn't hard to find, not even in a packed ballroom. I bet even with my eyes closed I'd be able to sense exactly where he was.

You idiot. What did you expect?

Of course he was holding court surrounded by a bunch of ass-kissers. That much had stayed constant all night, even as he'd roamed through the Elysium making sure everything ran smoothly. Ever-present at his side was his date, whom I didn't dare think of by his name. That would make him real, and he wasn't real. He was just a fill-in. No one that would matter a few short hours from now—at least, that was what I hoped.

God, I was petty as fuck.

Archer looked up suddenly, catching me staring at him the same way he had all the other times I hadn't been able to stop myself. I thought I'd been so good all my life at hiding my true feelings, acting unaffected when deep down I was a tumultuous wave of emotions. Archer seemed to be the exception, and I knew I was living dangerously by letting it show.

A hand clamped down on my shoulder. Daire grunted, shoving a shot glass of what smelled like tequila into my hand. The bruise he sported from kicking Joey's ass was settling into shades of green that he'd refused to let Serena cover with makeup.

"What?" I said. "Am I being obvious?"

"If you have to ask…"

For Daire to be the one to save me from myself, I must've been mooning like a fool.

I didn’t argue, just tapped my glass against his and downed the shot. Definitely tequila, though it was so smooth I didn’t need a chaser.

“Thanks,” I said, setting my glass on the tray of a passing waiter.

Daire nodded in acknowledgment and then went quiet, passively looking over the crowd.

Hell, since he was here, I may as well ask him the question I was dying to know the answer to.

“Wanna talk about what happened with Gavin and Joey the other day?”

When he didn’t answer right away, I figured he wouldn’t, but after a long moment, he shrugged.

“Joey’s a dick-fuck.”

I waited for him to elaborate, but I should’ve known better. Daire wasn’t exactly the forthcoming type, so unless Gavin decided to give up the goods to the rest of us, we weren’t getting shit.

Further proof he didn’t want to talk about it was when he inclined his head toward Serena a few feet away on the dance floor, where she’d been with her roommates since I passed on joining her. “You should be out there.”

“Nah, not really in the mood.” She’d done her best to take my mind off things, but I didn’t want to be the downer ruining her night.

When I started to look in Archer’s direction, Daire moved, blocking my view.

I cursed. Maybe I should’ve been grateful I had someone, even Daire, making sure I kept my eyes off a certain someone, but I was dying to know if not being with me was having any effect whatsoever on Archer.

I could do this. I could stand here for another hour or two and pretend.

That was the plan, anyway, before the gossip mills began to run.

“Did you see he brought a date?” an older woman said from behind me. “It must be serious if Archer Carrington is showing him off. He never brings anyone to these events.”

“And so handsome,” another woman agreed. “They make a gorgeous couple. Do you think he’s got something to announce?”

“Hmm, he *does* look different tonight…”

While they continued to speculate about Archer and whatshisname, my entire body went numb. I couldn’t feel my feet. My hands. There was a buzzing in my ears louder than the sound of the crowd, loud enough it blocked out whatever they were saying.

Daire did a double take when he looked at me, and then he shook his head, warning me not to react.

A few weeks ago, that would've been easy. No problem at all. Back then I didn't know what Archer tasted like or how it felt to have him inside me. What it was like to wake up in his arms and have him look at me like I was the only person in his world.

The urge to claim him in front of all of these assholes was overwhelming, and when the feeling came back into my limbs, I clenched my fists.

"Look at that," one of the women said, the glee in her voice forcing me to sidestep Daire to see what was going on.

He didn't notice I'd moved until it was too late. Until my gaze landed on the hand of the fucker who should get lost and I saw the way he was stroking Archer's lapel and smiling at him. No doubt the group they were chatting with was giving them the same encouragement the women behind me were spewing, egging this shit on.

My pulse sped up as Archer wrapped his hand around the guy's wrist—and then, like he knew I was watching, his eyes met mine.

It was irrational, I knew it, but I didn't care, because my heart felt like it was cracking in two. And the truth was, what was happening looked natural. They looked like they should be together. They probably had more in common; he probably wasn't half Archer's age. Definitely wasn't dating his daughter.

Daire gripped my shoulder, hard, and I barely heard him as he said, "I don't mind a second black eye. Just say the word."

But I couldn't. I didn't want to hurt Archer or cause him any embarrassment, not on his big night, but I couldn't force the words out, because it felt like someone was sitting on my chest.

I shook my head, still in a staring match with Archer. He pushed his date's hand away, but it was too late. I had to get out of here.

"Need…some air," I managed to say, stumbling back out of Daire's hold.

"I'll go with—"

"No." I glanced at the dance floor, where Serena was thankfully oblivious to what was happening. "Tell her I had to go."

He opened his mouth like he wanted to say something, but then he snapped it shut and nodded.

And I took off like a bat out of hell.

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THIRTY-THREE

archer

FUCK.

MY CHEST tightened and my heart pounded as I watched Preston disappear into the crowd. *Goddammit*. I knew I'd caught Rodney's hand too late, but to see the hurt in Preston's eyes was like taking a knife to the chest.

Where was he going? What was he thinking? I searched the dance floor for Serena, trying to track down the one person I knew would go after him to make sure he was okay. But when I caught her laughing and spinning around the ballroom with her friends, a bead of sweat popped out on my brow.

"Isn't that right, Archer?"

At the sound of my name, I brought my attention back to the group surrounding me, and as they stood there staring at me expectantly, their faces began to blur.

Jesus. Was I having a heart attack? I was forty-two—it could happen.

"Archer?" The concern in Rodney's voice was obvious, but as my vision began to clear, so did the façade I'd taken part in tonight.

I didn't want to be here with Rodney. That wasn't his fault. I should've canceled this date long before now. I should've canceled the second Benoit reminded me about it.

Instead, I'd made a colossal fucking mess out of everything. Now everyone on the Upper East Side was speculating on whether we were a couple, when the one person I wanted by my side had just slipped out the door.

Slipped away from me.

“Can you hold this?” I handed Rodney my whiskey tumbler and felt a pang of guilt over what I was about to do next. But I didn’t have time to think about that now.

“Uh…sure. Are you okay?”

No. But I will be when I find Preston.

“Yes. I just— I need to go check on something.”

I didn’t bother waiting for a response, excusing myself and heading to the bar where Preston’s crew was holding court. I needed to find Preston, but I had to be careful. None of them knew what was going on between us, so whatever I said here needed to be stealthy. Something I was usually good at—when I was in my right mind.

As I weaved my way through the crowds, I did my best to appear jovial, thrilled with how the night was going as the president of the Elysium. But deep inside, all I wanted to do was rush out the door and make sure Preston was okay.

I ran over several excuses I could use to ask about his whereabouts, and just before I reached the bar, Daire—who, I’d noted earlier in the lineup, was sporting a black eye—moved into my path.

The scowl on his face made the fading bruises seem darker than they were as he crossed his arms and looked at me as though he wanted to punch me in the face.

“No.” That one word was the last thing I expected to hear as I stopped opposite him.

I slipped my hands in my pockets and forced a smile as I looked around at the crowded hall, making sure no one was watching us. “Excuse me?”

“No, we’re not gonna tell you where he went.”

If I thought the *no* caught me off guard, then those words were downright shocking.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Lies. Everything out of my mouth tonight felt like a fucking lie.

“Sure you don’t.”

I gritted my teeth, trying for patience as I did my best to acknowledge passersby with a polite smile or nod.

Nothing to see here. Nothing going on. Just me, about to stroke out, at the Winter Ball.

“I was just coming over—”

“To find out where Preston went.”

“I…” Wait a second, how did Daire know that? I could’ve been checking on Serena. I could’ve been coming to get a drink. I could’ve been doing a whole host of presidential activities, but no, he’d zeroed in on the one thing I shouldn’t be doing.

I reached for my bow tie and tugged at it a little, feeling as though it was strangling me.

“Don’t bother lying. You look as shit as he did.”

Fantastic. This night was going from bad to worse.

It was clear that Daire knew exactly what the hell was going on between me and Preston, and while that thought triggered alarm bells, the more pressing issue right now was where Preston had gone.

“Where is he? Did he go home?”

Daire looked past my shoulder, and I knew exactly whom he was looking at without bothering to turn. “Why do you care?”

I’d just about had enough of this. I wasn’t about to stand here and argue with one of Preston’s friends because he was in the mood to play protector. This was between me and Preston, something Daire was about to find out real quick.

I stepped forward. “If you don’t tell me where he went and then get out of my way, I’m going to give you a matching accessory for your face.”

The feral smirk that curled Daire’s lip looked slightly unhinged. “Said he needed some air.”

That was all I needed to hear. I took off toward the exit and hoped like hell he was still out there. The cold air was like a punch to the face as I burst out into the snow-covered alley.

“Preston!” I called out, rushing into the middle of the street. “Preston, are you out here?”

I couldn’t see him anywhere. The lights over the many side exits of the Elysium showed nothing but empty alcoves, the white powder on the sidewalk undisturbed.

Fuck. Had I missed him? Was he already gone?

“Archer?”

I spun to see Preston stepping out from the opposite end of the street. He had his hands stuffed in his pockets and his shoulders hunched forward in an attempt to ward off the chill, but the falling snow made that close to impossible.

Relief flooded my body as I jogged over to him. But as I got closer and caught a glimpse of the frown worrying his brow, that relief turned to unease, and I remembered the reason I was out here in the first place.

“Preston.” The cold air puffed out of my mouth as I came to a stop opposite him. “What are you doing standing out here? It’s snowing.”

Preston looked up to the sky, snowflakes catching on his long lashes. The idea that I’d hurt him again gutted me worse than anything I’d ever experienced.

“Preston?” He brought his gaze back to mine, and my breath caught in my throat. He looked beautiful. No, he *was* beautiful. “I said it’s snowing. Aren’t you cold?”

“No. I don’t feel anything.”

The double meaning was as obvious as the white flakes falling around us. I moved closer, but he took a step back.

“Isn’t that what you want to hear?” he asked.

“What? No. Why would you ever think—”

“That you want me to stand in a room full of people, talking about you and your new boyfriend, and smile and act like I’m not *dying* a little every time someone mentions it? Maybe because that was my only option tonight.”

“What other option could there be?” I fired back. “Do you really think I like what’s going on in there? I didn’t expect people to care one way or another if I brought a date.”

Preston’s eyes widened. “Seriously? Were you not listening the other day on *our* date? Most eligible bachelor in the city. That ringing a bell? Of course people were going to talk if you brought a date.”

He was right—I hadn’t been thinking about that at all. “But I thought we decided that this was the only way it could be.”

“Right.” He nodded and ran a hand through his hair. “You’re right. This is what we decided. But talking about it and actually watching him *touch* you, Archer…”

Preston shook his head and started to pace the empty alley before he whirled around and pointed to the door of the Elysium.

“It should be *me* in there.” He bit down into his lip as it began to tremble, and I couldn’t tell if it was from the cold or something more. “*I* should be the one standing beside you in there. Holding your hand and laughing with you…”

He looked away from me, his eyes welling as he whispered, “It should be me.”

I crossed over to him, unable to stay away, and at the sound of my approach he glanced up. But if he wanted to move, he was out of time, because there was no way I couldn’t touch him. Not when he was standing there pouring his heart out to me.

“Archer, don’t—”

“What?” I took hold of his face and angled it up toward mine. “Don’t tell you that you’re right? That I knew the second you stepped in the building tonight because I could feel you in every single part of my body?”

“Yes.” His eyes beseeched me to stop. “But I don’t want to hear it.”

“I need you to know.”

He put his hands on my chest and gave a gentle shove. “Not when you’re going to go back in there to him.”

He was right, of course. I did have to go back in there to Rodney. But that could wait. This couldn’t, and I wasn’t leaving until I knew he understood how desperately I wished things were different.

“If I could have had you at my side tonight, I would’ve proudly stood there with you. But this isn’t as easy as showing up as each other’s dates, Preston.”

He pulled my hands from his face, that same sad smile from the yesterday returning. “Your date’s waiting for you.”

“And he can keep waiting. Don’t leave like this.”

“Don’t ask me to stay.” He took a step back, his entire demeanor resolute in his decision. “I’m going home.”

“We’re not done here.”

“Aren’t we?”

His words were like a sucker punch to my gut. So final, so unexpected, because I knew he was talking about a whole lot more than this conversation.

“Let’s face it, Archer. He’s perfect for you. The right age, the right pedigree, the right look. I know when I’m in over my head, and I’m drowning here. Thanks, though, this has been…fun.”

He turned on his heel and began to walk away from me, but I grabbed his arm and hauled him back to face me.

“*Fun*?” I said. Preston grunted as I took both his arms and dragged him off the street and over to one of the alcoves, desperation and frustration

flooding my body. “You did not just say that to me.”

He couldn’t have. Not when this had been *everything* to me.

“He’s the right fit. He’s—”

“Not. You.” I slammed my mouth down on top of his before he could start up with any more of his asinine reasoning. Preston groaned and opened for me, which felt like a major victory when he’d practically just broken up with me.

I plunged my tongue in deep, staking claim over him the only way I could right now, and Preston dug his fingers into the sleeves of my jacket, pulling me closer. His tongue curled around mine as I muscled him back against the cold brick wall and flattened my body up against his.

God, how stupid had I been to think that I could go all night without touching and tasting him this way? I’d somehow convinced myself that I’d be able to keep control, that I’d be able to stay away from him and just be content watching from afar. But having him so close and not able to touch had been torture. Absolute fucking torture.

He was here with me now, though, caught up in this moment of insanity and passion, as he slipped his hands beneath my jacket and down to my ass, spreading his legs for me to get in between.

I shouldn’t. I knew better. Anyone from the Elysium could step outside. Any one of his friends could come looking for him. But not even the threat of discovery could stop me now.

“Preston.” I groaned and entwined my fingers through his hair. But before I could tell him there was no one else for me but him, his mouth was back on mine, silencing me.

The time for talking was done. I rocked my hips forward, and his desperate whimpers told me just how fucking good he felt. I dragged a hand down between us and popped open the button of his pants. As I unzipped the material and slipped my hand inside to stroke his thick, covered cock, Preston stiffened and ripped his mouth from mine.

“Stop.” He panted and buried his face in the shoulder of my jacket. “Please, you’ve got to stop.”

My hand froze where it was, my breathing matching pace with his. Then I turned to kiss his temple. “What’s wrong?”

“I…” Preston lifted his head, his eyes glazed over with arousal. “This… We… Not like this. Not when I’m leaving without you.”

“Preston, I can’t leave.”

“I know. But would you, if you could?”

I grazed my thumb across his kiss-swollen lips, never feeling more defeated and helpless in my life. “In a heartbeat.”

Preston swallowed and reached down to zip up his pants. “Then that will have to be enough.”

He slipped out of the alcove and back into the street, and I stepped off the sidewalk to watch him go. The snow began to fall a little harder, and the night air seemed all the more chilly, as our moment of passion and insanity came to a silent, bitter end.

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THIRTY-FOUR

preston

FROM MY LIVING room window, I watched as snow flurries drifted across the city, coating the buildings below in a soft white blanket. It had started the moment I stepped out of the Elysium, and by the time I'd arrived at the Towers, my tuxedo was soaked through. I'd quickly stripped out of the restrictive clothing, leaving it discarded in a pile on my bathroom floor, and changed into a pair of lounge pants and a t-shirt.

It wasn't like I'd be going back out, and the Winter Ball wouldn't be over for at least another couple of hours. I didn't expect the guys anytime soon, not when they'd all been making plans to hit up an afterparty. Serena had already sent a text, checking on me, but I'd lied and told her I was fine and was just going to pass out.

Yeah, right. With the way my mind was reeling, I wouldn't be sleeping at all.

I lifted the glass of whiskey and took a long sip. It wasn't something I usually chose to drink, but it reminded me of Archer. He'd been drinking it tonight; I'd tasted it on his tongue when he kissed me, and somehow swallowing it now eased the ache in my chest a little.

Maybe that was just the effects of the alcohol, but I'd take it. The alternative was a little too painful.

The glass was cool as I rested my forehead against the window, looking at the cluster of buildings that surrounded the Elysium. I couldn't see them clearly from my view, only the general area, but I could imagine what was happening inside at that very moment.

Archer smiling and laughing, entertaining the masses like he hadn't just destroyed me outside. Would he be affected at all, or had I slipped from his mind the second he walked back inside? Would his date insist on going back to Archer's place—and would Archer let him?

No, I thought. He wouldn't do that. I needed to stop being so goddamn paranoid. Everyone always said how mature I was for my age, but that wasn't the case now. I wasn't used to feeling insecure, but then again, I also wasn't used to wanting more with someone I was sneaking around with.

But he'd said he would've left with me in a heartbeat if he could've. That had to mean something. Or were they just empty words?

I'd turned away from the window, heading toward the kitchen for a refill, when someone began to bang on my door.

Not just knocks, but some serious pounding.

There could only be one person trying to leave dents in my door, and I'd told Daire not to bother. No doubt he wanted to make sure I wasn't trying to jump out of a window, but I didn't want to deal with anyone right now.

When the banging started up again, I set my glass on the counter and made my way to the door, cursing under my breath.

"Daire, for fuck's sake, I'm fine. You didn't need to leave the—"

I swung the door wide to see the last person I expected standing there, and my words got caught in my throat.

With his hands on the frame and his bow tie undone and loose around his neck like he'd pulled it free in frustration, Archer lifted his eyes to mine.

My heart stopped.

Stunned didn't even begin to cover it.

"What…what are you doing here?" I sputtered. "What about the—"

I didn't get a chance to finish that sentence, because Archer reached for me, grabbing either side of my face. A second later, his mouth was on mine, stealing all my breath.

For a moment, I thought I was dreaming. But as my fingers curled into the strands of his hair that were still wet from melted snow, my brain finally kicked in. He was really here.

Which meant Archer had left his own event to show up on my doorstep.

Holy…shit.

I wanted to ask him why, how, but Archer was insistent, kissing and sucking on my lips like he'd never gotten a chance to before.

He walked me backward into the condo and kicked the door shut behind him. Then he dropped his forehead to mine, breathing heavily. “I couldn’t stay. Not without you.”

My heart lurched, and if he hadn’t had a firm hold on me, I was sure my knees would’ve given out. His words were everything I’d wanted to hear, and I had to swallow back the emotion threatening to overwhelm me.

“Take me to your room, Preston.”

I entwined our fingers, walking us further inside, leading him to the one place I’d always imagined him—my bedroom.

We slipped inside like thieves in the night, and the second the door shut, it was as if the entire world faded away.

Archer was here.

Here at my place.

Here in my room.

Here with me.

He’d left the biggest event of the season to come to me, and deep in my heart, I knew that had to mean something.

“Archer,” I whispered, drawing him in close enough that our toes touched. “What about—”

“Shh.” He put a finger to my lips. “There’s nothing right now but you and me.”

My heartbeat was so loud I was surprised he couldn’t hear it in the silence of my room. How many times had I imagined him saying something like that to me? Too many times to count. It was like a dream, one I never wanted to wake up from.

Archer drew our hands up, studying our fingers where they were joined, then brought them to his mouth and pressed a kiss there.

“Will you do something for me tonight?”

Anything. That was what I wanted to say. But I couldn’t seem to find the word, not when he was looking at me like I was everything he’d ever wanted.

“Let me love you.” He cradled my cheek, then leaned in to brush his lips across mine. “Let me show you *all* the ways I love you.”

I sucked in a ragged breath. “You… You love me?”

“More than I ever thought possible.”

My eyes blurred and I blinked, trying to keep focus. I didn’t want to miss anything, not the way his eyes softened or the crease at the corner of

them as his lips curved against mine. He was the most handsome man I'd ever seen, and he *loved* me.

"Am I dreaming?"

Archer chuckled, stroking his thumb over my cheek. "No, you beautiful boy. This is not a dream."

"Are you sure?" I turned my head to press a kiss to his palm. "Because it feels very similar to some of the dreams I've had in here."

"Oh? And how do they usually go?"

"Well…" I brought my eyes back to his. "I tell you I love you, and then…"

"And then?"

"Then I wake up."

Archer's fingers tightened around mine, determination replacing the softness from seconds ago. "Tell me."

My pulse skipped erratically as I stared up into the most perfect face I'd ever seen, and it was like my future flashed before my very eyes.

A year from now… Five… Ten…

And in every single scenario, the person I saw beside me, the person I *wanted* beside me, was Archer. "I love you."

The second the words left my lips, Archer's mouth was on them, stealing them for his own. He let go of my hand to reach for me, and as he angled my face for a deeper connection, I grabbed his wrists for something to hang on to.

The kiss was tumultuous, a meeting of not only our mouths, but our hearts and souls. I could feel the difference in an instant—the warmth, the passion, the intention behind every sweep of his bold tongue as it claimed every inch of my mouth as his. That's exactly what I was, *his*, and somehow I knew that I always would be.

Archer kissed the corner of my lips. "Still think you're dreaming?"

"No." I put a hand to his chest and closed my eyes, concentrating on the steady thump of his heart. "But if I am, don't let me wake up, okay? Not yet."

"Promise. Will you undress for me? Let me feel you against me."

I nodded and took the end of his bow tie, drawing it from around his neck. "Only if you do too."

He tugged the ends of his dress shirt free of his pants and unbuttoned as I pulled my t-shirt over my head. Then we both removed our pants and fell

onto the bed in a naked tangle of limbs.

I scooted up the mattress, my head hitting the pillow as Archer shifted over me. The exquisite pressure of his body pressing me into the soft sheets had me thrusting my hips up into his.

“So responsive.” Archer trailed the back of his fingers down my ribs to my waist. “I love the way your body moves for me.”

“Only you…”

He did it again, this time drawing his fingers up my side, and my cock lurched at the gentle touch. Archer smiled against my mouth and gently rocked over me.

“Yes, just like that.”

I wound my arms around his neck and bent my legs to plant my feet on the mattress, putting Archer where I wanted him most—between my thighs.

His thick, heavy cock lay alongside mine, and I could feel every pulse as the warmth of his arousal dripped against my skin. I rolled my hips up, connecting our bodies in a sticky slide as I dragged my dick across his and held him tight.

Everything about tonight felt different. Every touch, every emotion, felt heightened because of the words that had been said, and when Archer’s gaze found mine, I knew he felt it too.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“Better than okay.”

He nipped at my lip, then he began to kiss his way down my neck to my chest. I reached for his head and threaded my fingers through his hair, and when he scraped his teeth over one of my nipples, a loud curse left my mouth. Archer’s eyes flashed fire as he flicked his tongue over the spot he’d just teased and watched for my reaction. The second he touched me, my hips jackknifed off the bed, rubbing my cock against him.

“Archer.”

He teased my nipple, nipping and biting the skin around it as he continued to watch me. “That’s another thing I love. The way you say my name.”

I tightened my thighs around him and grunted. “Told you.”

“Yes, you did.” He planted a kiss at the center of my chest and aimed a devilish grin my way. “So let’s see if I can make you shout it tonight instead.”

Oh hell, I knew he could. He just had to keep looking at me like that and I'd be able to get myself off. But I had a feeling Archer had other plans in mind by the way he dragged his tongue down the middle of my body to flirt with my navel.

This wasn't a dream, that much I knew was true. But if he kept teasing me the way he was, I wasn't sure I'd survive until morning.

I glanced down to see Archer's mouth precariously close to my cock. Whenever he bent to kiss a new patch of skin, it perked up, hoping it was its turn. But it seemed he was determined to drive me out of my mind tonight, and my one and only job was to let him love me.

Damn, when did I get so lucky?

Archer nuzzled his way down my treasure trail, nosing the soft, short hair there as he inhaled my scent, and something about the act was so earthy and raw that it made me feel as though I was marking him in a whole new way, imprinting myself on his DNA somehow, so that anyone who came near knew he was mine.

The idea made fire run through my veins, and when his stubble-covered jaw grazed the side of my cock, I twisted my fingers in his hair.

"Fuck," I panted.

A low growl was all I heard as he wrapped his fingers around the base of my dick and directed it toward his mouth. With his eyes on mine, Archer lowered his head and the sight of him tonguing my slit was all it took for me to grant him his wish—I shouted out his name.

I slammed my eyes shut and threw one of my arms across them, the physical and visual stimulation too much for my precarious control. But then the sound of him groaning and sucking on me hit my ears, and there was no use trying for control.

I stared down at the sexy man between my legs and punched my hips up, trying to get deeper inside his mouth. Archer swallowed me down in one greedy gulp, tearing another, more desperate, shout from my lips.

"Archer. *Oh God*…"

His heavy-lidded eyes found mine as he reached under my legs and brought them up over his shoulders. I tightened my fingers in his hair and pushed in and out of his mouth.

I felt as though I was having an out-of-body experience, to be in this bed where I'd spent so many nights fantasizing about this man, and now here he was, loving me in a way I never imagined possible.

Archer took a nice, long suck and let me go with a soft pop, then crawled up and over me.

“Tell me you’ve got something in one of those drawers to get you nice and slick for me.”

I nodded and licked my lips. “Top one. You’ll find a bottle and—”

“The bottle’s all I want.” He brushed his lips over mine. “I’m safe. I’d never risk you, and if you’re okay with that—”

“I am,” I rushed out before he could finish, arching up to kiss him hard. “I’m safe too. Got checked at my last physical, and, well, there’s only been you since then.”

Archer crushed his lips to mine, following me back down to the pillow, and as the idea of him inside me bare and naked started to spin in my head, I lifted my legs to wrap them around his waist.

“So impatient.” He chuckled. “Let me make this good for you. Let me get what I need.”

I touched my tongue to my top lip, then nodded. I wanted everything his eyes and words were promising.

Archer pulled open the drawer and grabbed the bottle of lube, and seconds later he was back between my thighs. He rested a forearm by my head and reached down between my legs with his slick hand. His slippery fingers fondled my balls and stroked down my perineum to my tight entrance, and then he began to tease and massage the puckered opening.

Archer stroked my hair on the pillow. “Close your eyes, listen to my voice.” He kissed my lips, then made his way up my jaw to my ear. “Give yourself to me. Let me have you.”

I felt like I was in some kind of daze, a far-off dream that was both relaxing and arousing, as I closed my eyes, free-falling into the sensation of his fingers gently stretching me, teasing and pushing me, as they slipped inside me and began to move.

Archer’s touch was as confident as his kiss. His fingers worked to seduce my body as his lips seduced my soul. He was everywhere but still not close enough, and I arched up into his hands, needing even more.

As though he could read my mind, Archer removed his fingers and shifted between my legs, and I pulled my knees up to my chest, opening myself to him in the most primal way.

“Take me.” I licked my lips. “Make me yours.”

A possessive light glinted in his eyes as he wrapped a large hand around his steely length. He guided it to my eager entrance, and as the head of his cock bumped up against my tight ring of muscle, I wrapped my legs around his waist.

Archer eased himself inside of me one thick inch at a time, and I moaned at the sensations flooding me. He felt incredible, hard and hot, pulsing and alive, and I rolled my hips to get him even deeper.

Archer gripped the pillow under my head and slowly began to move in and out of me. His heart beat fast against my chest, as his warm breath swept across my skin like a seductive caress.

I was surrounded, enveloped, completely taken over by him, and I'd never felt more connected to another living soul.

"I love you." I punctuated my confession with a kiss to his temple, and Archer lifted his head and caught my lips in a kiss I felt in every fiber of my being.

His tongue plunged into my mouth at the same time his cock did my body, and as we began to move in complete synchronicity, it was as if nothing in the world mattered but the two of us.

"Preston." Archer lifted his head and looked down at me. The expression on his face was so full of love and awe that it just about took my breath away. "Can't ever go back…"

I knew exactly what he was saying. That after tonight, there was no going back. No hiding this, us, from the world. No more sneaking around in the shadows.

I knew because I felt the exact same way.

I tightened my legs around his waist, my ankles crossed at his lower back, as I swallowed every moan, every sigh, every promise he whispered.

I wanted to lose myself inside him, and have him get lost in me.

"Let go for me, you pretty young thing."

I tensed at the nickname that was all mine, and my orgasm rushed down my spine. It caught me up in its tumultuous wave, and I pulled Archer to me as though he were a lifeline and I was about to get swept away.

Emotions bombarded me from every direction, and as they crashed into me with blinding force, Archer's name echoed around my room. He stiffened inside me, and as he trailed his fingers down my cheek, I turned my head and kissed them.

We were right there, standing at the edge of our future, and all we had to do was jump.

As I began to tremble and fall apart beneath Archer, he buried his face in my neck and followed me.

Two souls coming together as one, as we fell into forever.

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THIRTY-FIVE

archer

THE GENTLE, RHYTHMIC sound of Preston's breathing kept me company as I lay wrapped around him in the soft cocoon of his sheets and quilt, watching the snow fall outside.

It was the perfect end to a not-so-perfect night, but as Preston snuggled against my chest, I knew I wouldn't have changed it for the world.

I was in love—deeply, unequivocally in love with Preston Abernathy.

When in the world had that happened? It was only weeks ago that I'd thought he was going to end up my son-in-law. To think about that now was just unfathomable, how this beautiful man was hiding such an important side of himself. It was heartbreaking, and something we needed to discuss further if we were going to have a chance at anything more.

I kissed the soft strands of his hair and gently extricated myself from his arms, not wanting to wake him. It wasn't that I couldn't sleep, more like I didn't trust myself to.

Was it possible to feel both restless and peaceful at the same time? I wasn't sure. But the idea that I might wake up and find out this was all a dream, or that I was in the midst of some midlife crisis and that Preston, the sweet, gorgeous man in my arms, wasn't really mine, had sleep eluding me.

I shifted off the mattress, scooped up my dress pants, and pulled them on. Maybe a drink would help with the insomnia—it certainly couldn't hurt, and I knew Preston would have some kind of liquor in this place.

With a final glance at the bed, I headed out into the living area of the condo and was grateful for the city lights illuminating the space. The last

thing I needed was to alert anyone of my presence by switching on a lamp, so I was thankful for the cover of darkness as I crept into the kitchen.

God, I was sneaking around a college kid's apartment.

Granted, it was a multimillion-dollar apartment, and not some dorm room back at Astor. But still, I *was* sneaking around, and that was another thing Preston and I were going to talk about. If this weekend had told me anything, it was that I hated not being able to tell people whom I was dating. I was an adult, for fuck's sake, and so was Preston. We needed to be able to live like it.

That was easier said than done, though. There were a lot of hurdles we had to get over before we could walk publicly into a room holding hands. But if this was what he wanted, if *I* was what he wanted, then I'd be right there with him, every step of the way.

No matter how messy it got.

I pulled open the freezer, betting on vodka for the win, and what do you know, there were two icy bottles of Beluga Gold inside. I grabbed a glass and poured a generous amount, and just as I was about to take a sip, I heard the door to the condo open and close.

My hand froze halfway to my mouth as I looked around for somewhere to hide, but I was screwed. To get back to Preston's room I had to walk by the front door, which meant whoever had just entered would be going to the opposite room, which was right past the kitchen.

I knew Preston and his friends roomed with one another here at the Towers, and I was sure him and Serena had mentioned whom he lived with at some point. But I'd be damned if I could think of who it was right then.

Then Travis McKinney sauntered around the corner, and Serena's colorful play-by-plays of his playboy lifestyle came tumbling to the forefront of my mind.

God help me.

Travis was halfway through shrugging out of his jacket when he caught sight of me in the corner of his eye. He stopped mid-shrug, whipping his head in my direction, and his jaw hit the floor.

"Mr. Carrington."

I might've laughed at the formal greeting had I not been standing in his kitchen half-naked. But as his made-up eyes traveled down to my bare chest and the open button of my pants, he seemed to recover from the shock and smiled.

“Mis*ter* Carrington,” he drawled as he tossed his jacket across the couch and made his way to the kitchen counter. “It’s so nice to see you again… *All* of you.”

Of all of Preston’s friends, of course it had to be the oversexed, horny one that he lived with. But I’d dealt with my fair share of oversexed men in the past. Travis didn’t intimidate me in the slightest.

“Evening, Travis.” I took a sip of my drink and eyed the clock on the wall. “Three a.m.—you’re getting home late.”

“I’m sorry, Daddy.” Travis leaned against the counter and licked his lips. “Want to spank me?”

I narrowed my eyes and chuckled. “How long have you been waiting to say that?”

“Since the moment I caught you and Preston sucking face at the charity event.”

Huh. It seemed Preston had some explaining to do. Apparently his friends knew a lot more than I was aware of. First Daire and now Travis. How long had they all been in the loop?

“So?” Travis arched a wicked brow. “Do you want to?”

“Thanks for the offer, but”—I picked up the bottle of Beluga Gold and went to step around him—“I prefer good boys.”

Travis acted liked I’d plunged a dagger in his chest as he spun around to watch me walk past him. “You’re killin’ me here, Zaddy Archer.”

Zaddy Archer*?* What the hell did that mean? I had no clue, but I wasn’t about to ask.

“Come on,” Travis said. “I’m sure if you ask Preston, he’d be more than happy to let me join.”

“I’m sure I won’t be asking Preston. Good night, Travis,” I said, laughing all the way down the hall. I had to give the guy points for trying.

“Your loss, Daddy Filth.”

When I stepped back inside Preston’s room and shut the door, I found him awake and on his side with the sheet down around his hips and his head propped in his hand.

His sleepy eyes roamed over me, and my cock had a very instant and real reaction.

“Please tell me you didn’t just run into Travis looking like that.”

“Okay, I didn’t just run into Travis looking like this.”

Preston’s lips twitched. “Are you lying to me?”

“No.” I pushed off the door and walked over to the bed. “I wasn’t holding this bottle of vodka when I ran into him.”

“And that’s supposed to make me feel better?” Preston flopped to his back. “Travis is—”

“Not my type.” I put the bottle and glass down on the bedside table and reached for my zipper. Preston turned his head on the pillow and bit down into his lip.

“No?”

“Nope.” I hooked my thumbs into the edge of the material and shoved it free of my hips, and as my pants fell to the floor, Preston eyed my erection.

“Then what is your type?”

I put a knee on the mattress and moved onto the bed, reaching out to finger the sheets by his waist. A second later, I whipped them off his body out of my way, so I could get a full look at what was mine.

“My type?” I said. Preston’s pretty cock hardened under my attentive gaze. “A gorgeous, preppy good boy who makes my heart pound as hard as my dick.”

Preston dragged his teeth across his lower lip as I shifted over the top of him. “Wanna know *my* type?”

I chuckled and placed a hand on either side of his head, as I lowered myself between his thighs. “I don’t know, do I?”

He nodded, winding his legs over the back of mine. “He’s smart, handsome, and has these sexy creases by his eyes because of how much he smiles. He’s the type of man I know will give me those same marks of happiness in, like”— the teasing flirt winked at me and grinned—“ten years?”

I snorted. “That’s supposed to make me feel good about myself?”

“That I plan to be with you in ten years? Damn right.” Preston craned up to take my lips in a hard, fast kiss. I swept my tongue around the sweet interior of his mouth, eliciting a low moan, and he arched off the bed and rubbed that tight, lithe body against mine. I rolled to the side and pulled him on top of me.

Preston followed, like we’d be doing this for years, and when he put his hands to my chest and sat up on my lap, I could hardly believe that he was mine.

“Damn, you’re something to look at.”

He ran his hands up my chest, twirling his fingers through the short hair there. “Look as long as you like. I’m yours.”

My stomach fluttered at his words. I wanted them to be true. But I wasn’t some young, naïve kid. I knew emotions could get out of hand fast in the heat of the moment, and I needed to know that Preston understood what he was saying. That he understood what I wanted from him.

I smoothed my palms up his thighs, massaging the strong muscle as I locked eyes with him. “You know what that means to me, right? I don’t want to hide anymore, Preston. This weekend was—”

“Horrible.” He blinked at me and nodded. “I know. For so long I’ve gone along with my parents’ ridiculous plan. I’ve followed the path they set out for me and not bothered to ever stray too far off it. I never had a reason to—until you.”

My heart broke for the sadness in his voice. I understood how hard it must’ve been to keep this part of himself a secret for so long. But knowing he was finally ready to set himself free, that he was willing to give himself—and us—a chance to really explore what we’d found with each other, made me happy.

“Watching you with someone else tonight…” He winced. “It was… I hated it. I never thought I was the jealous type, but all I wanted to do was stand on one of those fancy-ass tables and tell everyone that you were mine.” He gave a self-deprecating smile. “Pretty immature, huh?”

“Uh, no. That’s pretty hot, actually. I probably would’ve hauled you out of the ballroom over my shoulder.”

Preston’s mouth fell open. “Really? I mean, we could always role-play it later today. The tables are still there.”

I was almost tempted to take him up on the offer, but unfortunately I’d been the one to arrange the cleanup crew, and I knew they were coming early this morning.

“Preston, what we’re talking about here? Us, going public? That’s not going to be easy.”

“I know, and my parents are probably going to—”

“Hunt me down with a shotgun?”

“I was going to say threaten or blackmail you, but you’re right, a shotgun is probably more likely.”

“I’m just saying that this is probably going to get messy. Are you ready for that?”

He lowered himself over me and brushed his lips across mine.

“I always knew I’d have to tell them one day, and as long as you’re with me—”

“I will be.”

“Then I’m ready. I want this. I want you.”

I smoothed a hand up his spine and gripped his neck, bringing him to me. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” Preston kissed me with fervor, his hands fisting in my hair to hold me in place as he dove in and ravaged every corner of my mouth. It was a kiss full of want. A kiss full of need. It was a kiss full of love and acceptance and the courage to chase after both, and I felt it all the way to my very soul.

I stroked the smooth skin of his back, and Preston’s eyes twinkled with mischief. “Do you think they’ll ask if you’re pregnant?”

His comment was so out of left field, so utterly ridiculous, that I couldn’t help but laugh as I pinched one of his ass cheeks.

“Pregnant? Are you done, smart-ass?”

“What? My dad has babies on the brain. That’ll be the easiest question to answer, so I figured we’d get a jump on it.”

“Oh, kind of like telling your friends that we’re together?”

Preston’s eyes widened.

“Don’t even try. Daire *and* Travis already confirmed tonight that *you* have loose lips.”

“No…” He shook his head and went to sit up, but I wrapped my arms around him, keeping him close. “That’s not what happened.”

“Uh huh, and what did happen?”

“Well…”

“Yes?”

“It’s your fault.”

I cocked my head on the pillow. “My fault?”

“Yeah. If you hadn’t left a huge purple bruise on my neck, none of them would’ve known about us.”

I opened my mouth to refute that, but had nothing.

“I mean, that and the fact that they caught me in a lie about hanging out with Serena when I’d been with you, and it was really all just a complete accident that they worked it out.”

I narrowed my eyes on Preston's guilt-ridden face. "So, it *wasn't* my fault."

He scrunched his nose up and rocked his erection against mine. "It was *kind of* your fault."

"Are you using your body against me right now?"

"Depends. Is it working?"

"Maybe." I leaned in until our lips were touching and whispered, "But how about you use me a little more just to be sure?"

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THIRTY-SIX

preston

AFTER SPENDING MOST of Sunday with Archer, I'd gone to Serena's that night to have "the talk"—the one I hadn't expected for us to have anytime soon, but the one she'd known was coming. Maybe Archer and I both leaving the Winter Ball early had tipped her off to how serious things had gotten so quickly, but she took the news in stride. Hell, she was smiling at seeing me so happy, and even though it was still strange, she was glad that her dad had found someone she knew would treat him well. Even if it meant she was losing her "boyfriend."

"So, where'd you disappear to Saturday?" West said from where he sat across from me in the Sprinter van Monday morning. "You missed an epic afterparty."

Travis smirked as he scrolled through his phone. "No, he didn't."

West narrowed his eyes. "What does that mean?" When Travis didn't answer, West kicked my foot. "Hello? What did you end up doing?"

"You mean whom," Travis corrected him, and I rolled my eyes.

Gavin shot up in his seat like something had burned his ass. "No way. Is that why Mr. Carrington left so early? Everyone was talking about it."

Now that had my attention. "People noticed?"

"Uh, yeah," Gavin said. "He was supposed to do a speech, and one of the other board members ended up going up there and talking out of his ass."

I shrugged. "Well, maybe he got food poisoning and wasn't feeling well."

“Or maybe he ended up naked in a certain someone’s apartment that he shares with *moi*,” Travis said. When everyone’s attention turned his way, he added, “What? If he didn’t want me to see his hot ass, he shouldn’t have been walking around without clothes.”

“You didn’t see his hot ass. He had pants on,” I pointed out. “You only wish you saw him naked.”

“Well, yeah. I mean, I did ask if you two wanted a third.”

My eyes went wide. “You did what?”

“Hellooo.” Donovan moved up to his knee on the seat, rising above us so he could get our attention. “You’re all missing a very important point right now. Which is Mr. Carrington *left his event and his date* to be with Preston.”

There was a brief moment of silence before the entire van broke out into catcalls and whistles, and I couldn’t help but laugh as West reached over and mussed up my hair.

“Yeah, yeah,” I said, shoving him off and smoothing my hair back into place.

“Does that mean he’s willing to risk it all for you?” East said mockingly, like he’d believe it when he saw it.

I didn’t have to tell him to fuck off with that, because Daire did it for me.

My lap buzzed once, then twice, then a third time, and when I saw the texts that had just come through, I frowned. “Huh.”

Travis leaned over to peek at my screen. “What’s wrong?”

“Something’s up with Serena. She just sent an SOS and said for us to meet her in our spot.”

“Us?” East arched a brow.

“Apparently all of us.”

“Guys,” West said, his voice wary, “why is Harry the Hacker messaging me asking if we need his help?”

“His help?” I repeated. Shit, did this have anything to do with Serena sending an SOS? “Tell him to meet us in our spot. Just in case.”

West nodded. “On it.”

I called Serena, but it went straight to voicemail. In all the years I’d known her, I couldn’t remember a time that had happened.

A wave of anxiety rolled through me, but I didn’t have time to focus on it as the Sprinter pulled up to Astor. The guys filed out ahead of me as I

pocketed my phone and grabbed my bag.

The second I stepped into the courtyard, I noticed something was… *different*.

The dozens of groupings scattered around all stopped talking and turned in our direction the second we walked past the gates. It didn't feel like the usual stares of admiration, though.

My steps slowed as I looked around, catching a few sneers, a few more looks of disgust. Some turned away to whisper to their friends; others looked down at their phones before shaking their heads at me…

Shit. They weren't staring at my friends at all. They were staring at *me*.

My heart began to thud loudly as my steps slowed.

Daire glared right back at every one of them before growling, "What the fuck are you lookin' at?"

"Your cheating-ass friend," a jock nearby said, before spitting on the ground a few feet from me.

East stopped moving so abruptly that I almost ran into his back. He turned slowly, like a king deigning to give attention to a peasant, and pinned the jock with a look so full of loathing, I would've pissed myself were I on the receiving end.

"I'd advise you to strongly consider apologizing for misspeaking."

The jock's eyes narrowed as he gestured at me. "He cheats on Serena with her *dad* like the pervert he secretly is, and you want me to apologize to this piece of shit—"

"You motherfucker." Daire grabbed him by the front of his shirt, and a flicker of fear passed through the guy's eyes. "Say that again."

"What, are you gonna hit me too? I doubt the dean will go easy on you this time, even if one of you guys *are* screwing her kid."

Daire's arm reared back, but Gavin jumped forward, catching him by the bicep and yanking him away before Daire's fist could make contact with the guy's jaw.

"Jesus, he's not worth it," Gavin said as he struggled to tug him back before West and Donovan moved in to help block our surly friend from doing anything stupid.

Like defend me.

Because what the jock had just said meant that somehow my secrets had come spilling out.

“Your girlfriend’s dad?” a girl at one of the benches yelled. “What kind of sick human does that?”

Her words set off a cacophony of insults:

“How could you do that to Serena?”

“I thought you were straight?”

“You’re fucking the daughter *and* the dad?”

“Who’s the better lay, Preston, huh?”

“Interesting family dynamics, isn’t it? Swapping out one Carrington for the other.”

It went on and on, each comment slapping me in the face, and I could only stand there, taking it. My feet felt rooted to the pavement, and it wasn’t until East swiped the jock’s phone and took a look at the screen that he addressed the others.

“Get him out of here.”

I felt someone’s arm wrap around my waist, but I was in such a surreal daze that I didn’t know how they managed to get my legs moving. All I knew was that they got me inside the building and into our meetup room in a blur before depositing me into one of the chairs.

“Oh no,” a soft voice said, and then Serena was kneeling in front of me. “Preston? Put your head between your knees and breathe, okay?”

I did as she said, taking in slow gulps of air as she rubbed my back. Faintly, I heard the other guys storm in, their voices raised and angry as the door slammed shut.

“I’m assuming whoever took that photo sent it to everyone *but* us,” West said.

“Whoever did it is an amateur.” East gave an inelegant snort. “Who doesn’t use something like that as blackmail? Instead, they gave it out to the masses for free. Idiot.”

“East,” Serena snapped.

“What? If Preston or your father had been blackmailed instead, we could’ve gotten ahead of this.”

“Or if Preston had kept his pants zipped outside an event filled with hundreds of guests, maybe this wouldn’t have happened,” Gavin said, and the room went quiet. “Don’t look at me like that—I’m just stating the obvious here. What the hell were you thinking, man?”

“Obviously, he wasn’t,” Serena said. “And can you put the photo away? You of all people should know what it’s like to see a family member getting

too…handsy.”

When I finally felt in control of my breathing again, I lifted my head and rested my elbows on my knees.

Serena gave my arm a squeeze. “You okay?”

I shook my head. “I should be asking you that question.”

“I’m fine.” Her tight–lipped smile didn’t agree with her words, though. “People are assholes. It’s not like we didn’t know that.”

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have…” I gestured toward the now-blank screen of Gavin’s phone. “I wasn’t thinking. I didn’t realize.” And now Serena would have to pay in humiliation for something we’d hoped to be able to control on our time.

“Preston, seriously, don’t worry about the rumors. They’ll pass whenever the next person fucks up.”

“They think I cheated on you.”

She shrugged. “You and I know the truth. Your friends know the truth. Who gives a shit what those morons think? Besides”—she flipped her hair over her shoulder—“they’ve all said worse about me before, and those things *were* true.”

There was a knock on the door, and West opened it to find a frazzled Harry, the tech guy we referred to as Harry the Hacker for his ability to make things disappear online, standing there holding on to the straps of his backpack.

“Do you want me to set up in here?” he asked, as West ushered him inside and shut the door.

“Yes,” West said, the same time I answered, “No.”

West shot me a look. “What do you mean, no? There’s a photo of you and Carrington in a pretty compromising position, and it’s only spreading. You want to keep that out there, or can Harry do his job and erase the image of Carrington’s hand down your pants?”

I blanched. *That’s* what the photo was? I’d assumed it was just us kissing, nothing more than that. This was even worse.

When I didn’t answer, West nodded. “That’s what I thought.”

Harry took a seat and began to set up as I rubbed my hands over my face.

Sure, he could get rid of anything online, but the damage was done. People had already seen it, were already talking about it. It would get around now, filter through the ranks of the Upper East Side…

It wasn’t the thought of my parents finding out the news that had my chest tightening.

It was what would happen to Archer when his colleagues found out.

Cursing under my breath, I pulled my phone out of my pants pocket, my hand shaking as I brought up Archer’s number and hit call. It went straight to voicemail, though, and I ended the call before leaving a message and sent him a text instead.

“Um.” Harry looked at me nervously as he pushed his glasses up his nose. He always looked nervous around us, so that was nothing new. I got the feeling he wanted to ask me a question, though.

“Yes?” I said.

“Did you want to make a statement or anything? Set the record straight or deny it? AI’s gotten better with deep fakes, so we could say the photo’s been manipulated and didn’t actually happen.”

I was tempted to deny it. Oh so very tempted. Not to save myself the embarrassment of what was happening, but to make the situation better for Archer and Serena.

But then I thought about waking up beside him yesterday, only hours after he’d told me he loved me. That he wanted to be with me. And it made my heart swell with feelings bigger than hate for whoever had outed us.

“No,” I said, getting to my feet. “I’m not denying anything. And I’m not putting out some statement to give people an insight to my private life. We’re consenting fucking adults.”

“Emphasis on the fucking,” Travis said, causing Serena to slap him upside the head.

Donovan came to stand beside me and squeezed my shoulder. “Are you sure? Because we’ve got your back no matter what. Hell, if you need a Van Talk before you decide, I can have Scotty bring the Sprinter to the back entrance.”

“I appreciate that,” I said, looking around at my friends all gathered together and skipping class to help me. I winked at Daire, who was sitting alone in the corner, his arms crossed. “I even appreciate your wanting to use your fists to defend me, but please don’t do it again.”

“No promises,” he grumbled.

“Look, I won’t be able to be with Archer if I’m not honest with myself and everyone else,” I said. “And that’s what I haven’t told you.” I took a deep breath, and Serena nodded, giving me the reassurance I needed to say it. “The truth is, Archer and I have decided we want to be together. No more secrets, no more hiding.”

One by one, jaws dropped, but I kept going.

“Obviously, we were still trying to figure out how to make that happen without causing some scandal. So…fail on that, I guess.”

“Epic fail,” East agreed.

“*But*…” Donovan shot East a look that said to shut up. “At least it’s out there now, even if it’s not the way you planned.” He pointed at himself. “If anyone understands a public outing, it’s me.”

That was true. It wasn’t like he’d wanted his secret life of dipping his toe into the porn waters with Kelly to get out, and once it had, the repercussions he’d expected hadn’t manifested at all. In fact, he’d recently driven us all out to the billboard in Times Square that featured him and Kelly *because* of their scandal.

Somehow, I didn’t think Archer and I would get the same treatment.

I glanced down at my phone again. Still no response from Archer, and I wondered what that meant. Had he gotten a heads-up, or would this all blow up in his face the way it had mine?

“He hasn’t answered me either,” Serena said quietly. “But I have a feeling he knows.”

I swallowed, not sure which option was the better one.

It’ll all work out, I told myself, forcing a calm I didn’t feel so my body didn’t head straight for a panic attack. *It has to.*

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THIRTY-SEVEN

archer

THE SOFT CLICK of the door shutting behind me was the final nail in the coffin of my run as a member on Astor's school board. I'd just been fired.

Fired…

I had never been fired in my life, and while the phrase those stuffed shirts in there had used was "let go," their condemnation over my extracurricular activities had definitely leaned more toward a firing. As in, they wanted to tie me to a pillar and bring out the firing squad.

Not exactly the way I'd anticipated starting my week. Especially after the amazing end to my weekend. But it seemed the blissful bubble that Preston and I had enjoyed for the past twenty-four hours had just exploded in the most spectacular way.

I let out a sigh and couldn't help but feel responsible for the total dumpster fire that was now roaring out of control. That photo was damning evidence if I'd ever seen it, and I had no one to blame but myself.

I'd known there was a chance someone would see me and Preston, that someone might follow us out into that alley. But did that stop me? No. No, it did not. All I'd been thinking about in that moment was making Preston understand whom I wanted, whom I cared about, and now there was proof.

Proof in the form of an explicit photo circulating the halls of the university my daughter attended.

Wow. Parent of the year over here.

I glanced up and down the empty hall, hoping like hell I could get out of there undetected. The last thing I needed was to draw more attention to myself, and I had no doubt the gossip was running rampant.

Poor Preston. This was exactly what he'd been hoping to avoid. It was already going to be hard enough for him to come out to his family, and now he had to deal with this? Everyone in the school staring at him, pointing, believing he'd cheated on his girlfriend with her *dad*.

I couldn't even begin to imagine what he was going through right now. Not to mention Serena. I wouldn't blame her if she publicly disowned me.

I needed to check in on them.

After I'd been called in to the emergency board meeting, I'd sent a text to Sasha that'd I'd be late into the office and switched off my phone. I'd never imagined the emergency had been me. But now that I'd been informed of my "offensive indiscretions," I had no reason to stick around and cause any more of a scandal.

I reached into my pocket for my cell and switched it on, and it started to buzz with email, text, and voicemail notifications. It seemed the gossip had raged like a wildfire while I was getting my walking papers this morning, as several messages from outraged Elysium members flashed across my screen.

The first email had the subject line: *Call for President Carrington's immediate resignation*

The second: *Archer Carrington, guilty of conduct unbecoming of the president of the Elysium*

The third—and probably the most damning: *I know what you did with my son, fucker. You're done.*

That was from Preston's father.

I had to respond, of course. There was no way I could avoid it. But when I spotted several missed calls from Serena and Preston, I knew where my priorities lay.

I'd already dealt with one angry mob this morning. I'd need more than a coffee to deal with the hypocritical and judgmental opinions of the Upper East Side. It wasn't as if being president of the Elysium had been a dream job. In all honesty, it took up way too much time, and caused added stress to every day of my life. So if they wanted me gone, no skin off my nose. I'd been doing them a favor by giving them access to my many connections.

It wasn't as if they could fire me as a member. That was a lifetime gig, no matter whose son I was sleeping with.

I shot off a text to Serena letting her know I was okay and asking how she was doing, and the message I got back made my heart race.

LOVEBUG:

I’m fine. You know me. I LIVE for the drama. But Preston… You need to call him.

I headed down the hall, needing to get back to the office, and called Preston’s number. A second later, he answered, his greeting low, like he wasn’t alone.

“Preston?” The December air was frigid as I stepped out into the courtyard of Astor.

“Yeah, hi, I’m here. One sec.”

A rustling sound told me he was moving somewhere that he could talk, and when I reached my driver and he opened the door for me, Preston’s voice was back in my ear.

“Okay, I’m here.”

“How are you?” It was a stupid question, but one I had to ask, as I slid in the back seat of my car. The warm air was a welcome relief to the distinct chill that had surrounded me all morning.

“I’ve had better Mondays. What about you?” Preston’s voice was quiet but not at all distant, and that was what I’d been most worried about. I hadn’t known what to expect from him after this very loud and public outing.

“I’ve had better myself.”

“Oh God, so you’ve heard, then.”

“Heard?” I gave a self-deprecating laugh. “I just got let go from Astor’s school board.”

“They *fired* you?” Preston’s outrage was appreciated, but I’d already accepted my fate. “Archer, this is not okay. I won’t let them do that. Not because of me.”

“Hold on a second. It’s not because of you that they fired me. I was there in that moment with you and take full responsibility for my actions.”

“But you did nothing wrong—”

“And neither did you, and that’s what I want to talk about, not me,” I said. Preston fell quiet. “I saw the photo.”

“You did?”

“I did. It was pretty damning, especially to you.”

“They don’t know what’s really going on.”

“I know that. But do you?”

“Of course I do, but…”

“But what?” I asked.

“I didn’t expect this level of hate. Jesus.” He let out a breath, and I could imagine him running an agitated hand through his hair. “Serena tells me it’ll all blow over the second the next piece of gossip drops. But right now, everyone thinks I slept with her *dad*.”

“Uh, I’m not sure how much sleeping we did this weekend, but—”

Preston’s soft laugh had my lips tugging up on one side despite the serious nature of this discussion.

“You know what I mean.”

“I do, and I’m sorry they think that. I know it was the last way any of us wanted this to play out.”

“Right, and to think the only thing I was worried about this weekend was telling my parents.”

“About that…” I winced, thinking of the email waiting for me from Preston’s father. “Have you heard from them yet?”

“No, I— Why, have you?”

“I haven’t *heard* from them, but I saw an email from your father, and I think you should be prepared to have that talk sooner rather than later.”

“Fuck.” He cursed a couple more times. “They know?”

“Yes. I’m pretty sure everyone on the Upper East Side knows. The Elysium is calling for my head as we speak.”

Preston let out a strangled laugh, his horror at the situation unfolding more apparent than ever. “This is all my fault.”

“This is not your fault.”

“If I’d just told my parents the truth instead of all these stupid lies, you’d still have your spot on the school board, Serena wouldn’t be humiliated—”

“Preston.”

“What?”

“You were going to tell them. You *are* going to tell them. You just needed time.”

“No,” he said softly. “I needed you.”

All of the bullshit I’d gone through that morning suddenly seemed worth it with those three words. “Do you want me to be there when you tell your parents?”

“God no,” he blurted out, then laughed a little. “Sorry, I didn’t mean that to sound so harsh, but—”

“You don’t have to explain. Truth be told, I think it’s best that your father and I keep a bit of distance between us for now. I just wanted to offer, if you needed the support.”

“Thank you.”

“You don’t have to thank me. I love you.”

I heard a soft sigh through the phone. “Say that again. It makes everything I’m going to go through today worth it when I hear that.”

“I love you.” The words came easy, the feeling now such a part of me that it was difficult to remember a moment when I didn’t feel this way.

“Thank God, because I just got a text, and my parents are here.”

I didn’t envy him the conversation he was about to have, but it was one that was needed, and hopefully he would feel lighter once he was on the other side of it.

“Should I pray for you?”

Preston groaned. “Probably. Can I come and see you later?”

“You don’t even have to ask.”

“Will you be at the Elysium?”

I scoffed, thinking that after they kicked me to the curb, it would be a good six months before I was allowed to step back inside.

“Why don’t you just meet me at my place?”

“Okay. Archer?”

“Yeah?”

“I just want you to know, I don’t regret a thing.”

“Me either.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too.”

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THIRTY-EIGHT

preston

FROM THE SECOND I slid into the back seat of my parents' car, the silence was deafening. Neither of them said a word or even looked my way as we made the short drive from Astor to their penthouse on Madison Avenue. I almost would've preferred for them to yell instead of filling the space with their icy disappointment, but I had a feeling that part would come soon enough.

I stared out the window, my mind replaying everything that had happened that morning, even though it was the last thing I wanted to think about. I didn't want to remember the insults and ugly looks aimed my way. I especially didn't want to think about the consequences Archer was dealing with right now, when all the two of us were guilty of was loving each other.

If I hadn't kept so much of my life secret for so long, this wouldn't be happening. Serena wouldn't be caught in the middle of something that wasn't her fault, and the only problem people would have with me and Archer was our age difference. Not what they all assumed because they'd been led to: that we were having some sort of sick affair under Serena's nose.

My stomach twisted as the car stopped in front of my parents' building, and I waited for them to exit before climbing out after them.

The ride up to the penthouse was the same, deathly quiet, until we reached their floor.

"Take a seat in the parlor," my father said, just before the elevator doors opened and he walked out, heading straight for the house manager. "Let the staff know they can all be excused."

To his credit, the man didn’t bat an eye, already used to the privacy my parents insisted upon.

More like they didn’t want anything remotely embarrassing to come out about them, which was why they waited until everyone had left before laying in on me.

The parlor was pure white—the couch, the armchairs, the curtains, the rug. It made you almost scared to sit for fear of leaving a mark, which was why I’d never ventured in there much when I lived with them.

But marring their precious furniture was the last thing I was worried about at that moment, so I took a seat on the couch and waited for their lecture. I still wasn’t sure how I would respond, leaving it up to what felt right in the moment. I knew I didn’t want to hide anymore, that I needed to tell them everything, but what form that would take…who knew?

As the last of the staff departed, my father strolled into the parlor, a crystal tumbler half-full of amber liquid in his hand. Considering that it was still morning, his drinking was the only indication so far that something was bothering him.

He stayed standing by the fireplace while my mother took a seat in one of the armchairs, and after taking a sip from his glass, he cocked a bushy eyebrow at me.

“Well? What do you have to say for yourself?”

A lot, actually. But I knew my father enough to know he already had a path set for this conversation. Best to just give a general apology and let him kick things off.

“I’m sorry.” There. That could encompass all my perceived sins.

He grunted and stared down at me, all that judgment weighing heavily on my shoulders.

“I’d like to hear what exactly you’re sorry for, Preston. For bringing shame to our family? For lying? Cheating? Disregarding your future for a moment of pleasure? Please explain to your mother and me what’s happening in that thick head of yours.”

I forced myself to breathe through my irritation as my temper began to rise.

“I apologize for hiding who I truly am for so long. That’s one of the few things I’m sorry for.”

“And who is that? Enlighten us.”

My mother stayed silent, letting my father take the lead, which was par for the course. I didn't expect her to chime in at all, not when he was this worked up.

"Who am I?" I said. "I'm someone who's spent years being who I thought you wanted me to be, at least in public. But I'm not that person. I don't want to go into politics. I don't want to hide that I'm gay. And I don't want it to be a secret that I'm in love with Archer Carrington."

Holy shit, I couldn't believe I'd just said all that out loud, but the words were true. Following in my father's footsteps, being in government… That wasn't for me, and it was past time I acknowledged that. And if I didn't want that life, then I didn't have to hide. I didn't need the secrets that had overtaken my life up to this point.

Even as I felt like I could breathe again after putting it all out there, my father's fury pushed back, suffocating everything in the room.

"Have you lost your mind?" he seethed. "Has that man brainwashed you into something you can't get out of?"

"No," I said quickly. The thought was *absurd*. "I'm the one who pursued him, not the other way around."

My mother's eyes were bugging out of her head as they darted between the two of us. "Wh-what about Serena?"

"Yes, what about my future daughter-in-law?" he said. "You'd blindside that poor girl with her own *father*?"

I shook my head. "She wasn't blindsided, and she was never going to be your daughter-in-law. Serena's my best friend, but that's all she is. I've never been a secret to her."

My father finished off the rest of his drink and slammed the glass down, causing it to crack. Then he turned his back on me, resting his hand against the mantel. "You're saying she helped you in this…this…*deception*."

"There's no one to blame in all of this except me. I take that on fully. Leave Serena and Archer out of this."

A laugh bubbled out of him, low at first and then rising until it echoed off the walls. He faced me again, and his expression had alarm bells going off.

"Leave Archer out of this, you say. No, I wouldn't dream of such a thing. As a matter of fact, I should pay him a visit—"

"No," I said, horrified. "I don't think that's a good idea."

“Why not? I’d love to see the look on his face when I tell him he’s no longer the Elysium president because he couldn’t keep his hands off my son.”

“What?” My mouth fell open. “You can’t do that.”

“I can do anything I damn well please, and effective immediately, Archer has been stripped of his position.” He smiled, but it was full of malice. “He’s also been fired from the Astor school board, and I can’t imagine many of his clients at CTA will be thrilled by his behavior.”

Shock and disgust had me clenching my fists as I stared up at him. “He doesn’t deserve that, and you know it. You’re punishing him when you should be taking it out on me.”

“Aren’t I? Since you claim it was your actions that led to this chain of events, his dismissal is, in fact, your fault.”

The sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach was because he wasn’t wrong.

My father crossed his arms over his barrel chest. “What, nothing to say now?”

“There isn’t anything I can say that would change your mind. Is there?”

He stared down at me, the answer clear in his expression. *No.*

“Right. So you brought me here just to tell me you’re going to punish him.”

“I brought you here to set you straight,” he said firmly. “Since you can’t be trusted to make decisions for your own good, I’ll be taking over from here.”

I blinked up at him, not sure I’d heard him right. His expression didn’t change, and when I turned to my mother, she was looking everywhere but at me.

It was all so insane that I couldn’t help my chuckle. Only once it started, I couldn’t stop.

“You find this amusing?” my father said.

“I do, actually. You want to take over…what, exactly? Because you may have missed it, but I’m not a kid anymore. Whatever you wanted me to do back then, I always jumped and asked how high, because I didn’t think I had another choice. Now I know better. I have nothing but choices. So, no. You won’t be taking over anything.”

The red flush in his cheeks deepened. “You expect me to sit back while you ruin your life making mistake after mistake? Do you even have a

plan?”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “But you know what? That’s okay. I don’t have to know everything right this second. I can finally figure out what I want to do with my life.”

“Preston, we just want what’s best for you,” my mom finally said as she worried her hands in her lap.

“I understand that, but maybe neither of you know what’s best for me anymore. I have to figure that out on my own.”

“Have we not given you everything? You’ve never wanted for a damn thing in your life, and you’ll never have to—”

“Let me guess, if I give up Archer?”

My father grunted. “It’s a small price to pay, son. Trust me.”

What he was suggesting was madness. There was no way I’d ever give up Archer. Not even if my father stripped away my inheritance or cut me off at the knees in any other way.

But the only way to get that through his head was to show him.

I stood up and relaxed my hands that had been tightly balled into fists for this whole conversation. “I don’t have to listen to any more of this. My life is just that—mine. So you can either choose to accept me and anyone I choose to be with, or…” I hesitated, unable to say the alternative, because even though I loathed them in that moment, they were still my parents. I dropped my hands by my sides and shrugged. “Or you don’t.”

“You don’t mean that.” My mother stood up, looking like she wanted to walk over to me, but only managed a couple of steps.

“Yes, I do.” The stricken expression on her face had me softening a little. I didn’t want to hurt anyone else today. “Everything will be okay, I promise. You’ve just got to give me the space and trust to figure it out.”

I turned on my heel and walked away, having said everything I wanted to.

“Preston,” my father called out as the elevator doors opened. “We’re not finished with this conversation, young man.”

I stepped inside, and as the doors began to close, I met my father’s stare. “Yes, sir. We are.”

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THIRTY-NINE

archer

“THIS IS SUCH bullshit. We can’t let them get away with this.” Serena was on a roll as she wore a hole in my rug from her inability to sit down. I couldn’t blame her for skipping the rest of her school day to be here, not when she was so riled up on my behalf. Hell, I’d had Sasha cancel everything on my calendar, wanting to be home whenever Preston finished with his parents. That was a conversation I knew wouldn’t go well, and I couldn’t imagine what state he’d be in when he arrived.

Serena tapped her phone in her hand, and I could almost see the wheels turning. “How about this. You’re the president. You fire *them*.”

“I think it’s a couple hours too late for that.”

“Then we reach out to your supporters and force them to reinstate you.”

“Bug?” I patted the couch cushion beside me. “Come sit.”

“I can’t. I’m pissed off.” She stopped suddenly. “How are *you* not more upset?”

I sighed and stretched my arm out along the back of the couch. It wasn’t even noon and it already felt like the longest day ever. “I’m choosing to look at it like they’re doing me a favor.”

“A favor? What are you talking about? They’re trying to humiliate you.”

“Aren’t you the one who told me I work too much?”

“Well…yeah—”

“Looks like I’ll have more time to spend outside of work if I’m not constantly at the Elysium or having to show up for meetings at Astor.”

“But…” She searched my eyes, trying to suss out the truth. “You’re okay with this?”

I shrugged. “I don’t really have a choice. Let someone else deal with all the headaches for once.”

“I don’t know how you’re taking this so much better than me. Aren’t you upset they’re trying to ruin your reputation?”

“Really? You think you’re the only one who lives for the drama?” When her jaw dropped, I smirked. “Where do you think you get it from? Now stop worrying about me, please.”

“This feels so backward,” she said, and was coming to sit by me when the doorbell rang. “I’ll get that.”

She disappeared for a minute, and when she came back, Preston was following behind her. When he stepped into the sitting room, all of the anxiety I’d been bottling up immediately rose to the surface, but when his eyes locked on mine and that beautiful smile appeared, all of the worry I’d been feeling quickly dissipated.

He’d come to me. I wasn’t sure why I was so surprised—I’d told him he could. But some small part of me had wondered if his parents would sway him.

“Preston.” I got to my feet, and as I moved over to where he and Serena stood, her eyes softened.

“I’m going to go,” Serena said. I opened my mouth to protest, but she held up a hand. “You two have a lot to talk about.” She leaned in and pressed a kiss first to Preston’s cheek and then mine. “I’m so happy for the both of you. Screw everyone else.”

Preston grinned as I shook my head. “That’s the spirit,” I said.

“Exactly. They’re just jealous.” She walked out of the sitting room, waving her goodbyes.

As Preston and I were left alone, I took his face in my hands and did what I’d wanted to do since I’d last seen him—I kissed him.

He melted into me, his hands on my chest and his body swaying closer, and everything in the world righted itself. It was sweet, poignant, and everything I never knew I’d needed.

I trailed my fingers down his cheek. “You survived.”

Preston chuckled and nodded. “Barely. Probably helps that I didn’t stick around long enough for my life to really be in jeopardy.”

“Well, I’m not going to complain about that.” I led him over to the couch, then sat down and wrapped my arm around him. “I kind of like you this way.”

Preston snuggled into my side, and I kissed him gently on the head.

“Was it terrible?” I asked.

“It wasn’t great.” He let out a sigh and kicked his legs up on the couch. “Let’s just say they weren’t overly pleased with me. But they’ll get over it eventually, I think. It was more about image than anything else. My father wanting to portray the perfect family. His son with a perfect wife and babies and—”

“Not a son who is dating his ex’s dad?”

Preston looked up at me, his lips twitching. “Yeah, well, her dad’s hot. Not my fault.”

“No? You just had to show up here stripping off all your clothes and making me want you?”

“I mean…you’re welcome.”

This right here made everything worth it. Without dealing with so many other responsibilities, I could just sit here and enjoy the man I’d chosen to be with. This was what our nights and weekends could look like. Wrapped up in each other.

“What are you looking forward to first?” I said, reaching down to link our fingers.

“Being able to hold your hand in public will be nice.” He brought our hands up to kiss my knuckles. “Kissing you any time I want. Just sitting here being with you. The list is endless.”

Because I could, I leaned down and brushed my lips over his. I wanted all those things too.

“What about you?” Preston said, turning my question back on me. “What are you looking forward to most?”

“Just knowing you’re mine.”

He smiled, almost shyly, though the man I’d gotten to know was anything but the shy guy I’d once thought him as.

He studied our joined hands. “Archer?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m sorry this all blew up. I know it’s my fault and I put you in a bad position.”

“You did no such thing.”

“Yes, I did. My father was right about one thing. Keeping secrets only sets off a chain reaction, and that’s affected you and caused this shitstorm.”

“Let’s not give your father too much credit here. Do you think I hadn’t thought through all the possible outcomes when I decided I wanted you?”

Preston didn’t say anything, just bit down into his lip.

I lifted his chin, forcing him to look at me. “I didn’t care. About any of it. I knew something like this would probably happen, and I did it anyway. Because you’re worth it. Because I love you.”

Preston’s eyes welled, the love I’d just spoken of swirling in them, reflecting back at me. “I love you too. So much.” He turned on the couch and scooted up on his knees beside me, taking my face in his hands. “I can’t believe it’s actually real. It just… It just feels too perfect.”

“Perfect?” I chuckled. “I was fired *twice* today. So, yeah, I’m pretty sure it’s real.”

He leaned into the back of the couch, moving his hand down to rest it over my heart. “So Archer Carrington is really mine?”

I covered the top of his hand and squeezed. “For as long as you want him.”

Preston’s lips crooked, and the mischievous grin had me narrowing my eyes.

“What?” I said.

“What if I want you forever?”

“Then that sounds like a pretty good plan to me.” I grabbed hold of him and leaned back into the arm of the couch, drawing him over the top of me. As he nestled between my legs, I wrapped my arms around him, loving the feel of him there.

“That’s the one thing I’m absolutely certain about,” he said.

“Meaning?”

Preston rested his chin on my chest, his eyes turning serious as they found mine. “Meaning I have no idea what I want to do in my life. Besides *you*, that is.”

I laughed and ran a hand down to his ass, swatting him there. “Be serious.”

“Oh, I’m always serious about that.”

“Preston…”

“I just mean… Now that I’ve told my parents I don’t want to pursue politics, what the hell do I want?”

It was a legitimate question. His whole life, Preston had been tailored for a world where he’d follow in his father’s footsteps. But now he had the

opportunity to do anything he wanted. The world was his proverbial oyster, and sometimes that was more stressful—trying to figure out who you were outside of the mold someone else had created for you.

"I don't know." I leaned down and pressed a kiss to his nose. "Only you can answer that. But you know what?"

"What?"

"You don't have to figure it all out tonight. Enjoy the newfound freedom you just granted yourself. You have plenty of time to figure all that out later."

"Ah, you're right. I mean, I'm only twenty-one and all…"

"Oh God." I groaned. "You really don't have to remind me. You sure you're okay being with an old man?"

"I told you, I don't see any old men here."

"You might if I break a hip and you have to carry me up those stairs."

"Nah, we'd just get one of those chairs that hauls you up. Or we could call Raul. He's got arms the size of tree trunks. He could carry you."

I busted out laughing. "Really? You'd pass me off to that guy?"

"Only if I can still be an active participant."

My dick stirred, and Preston arched a brow.

"I felt that."

"Maybe I wanted you to."

He sat up and moved to straddle my lap, wiggling his ass over my cock to tease me. "Well, it looks like we've only got one more hurdle to face."

"And what's that?"

His grin could only be described as cheeky. "I've got to officially introduce you to my friends."

"I'm pretty sure they already know who I am."

"They do as Mr. Carrington. But not as *Archer*. Not as mine."

"Yours, huh? I could get used to that."

"You better. I'm not going anywhere." Preston leaned down and sealed our promise with a kiss. His soft lips parted above mine, his tongue teasing and tangling. He felt exquisite in my arms, as though he'd been made to be there—and if I had my way, I'd never let him go.

This was the start of our forever. I could feel it. A new beginning, one of the many changes I was about to make in my life. Preston had restarted my heart, reminding me that I wanted more from life than going through the motions.

It was time to start living. Time to start enjoying everything I’d worked so hard to achieve.

And I’d be doing it all with my pretty young thing right by my side.

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Who knew that Preston would out-scandal these cocky princes? So the only question left for now is…who is next?

Any guesses?

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about ella frank

Ella Frank is the *USA Today* Bestselling Author of the *Temptation series*, including Try, Take, and Trust and is the co-author of the fan-favorite *Fallen Angel series.* Her *Prime Time series* has been praised as “highly entertaining!” and “sexy as hell!”

A life-long fan of the romance genre, Ella is best known for her steamy, heartfelt, M/M romances.

If you’d like to get to know Ella better, you can find her getting up to all kinds of shenanigans at:

The Naughty Umbrella
(Facebook Group)

And if you would like to talk with other readers who love Ella’s character’s from her Chicagoverse, you can find them **HERE** at
Ella Frank’s Temptation Series Facebook Group.

Want to stay up to date with all things Ella?
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about brooke blaine

Brooke Blaine is a USA Today Bestselling Author best known for writing romantic comedy and M/M romance. Her novels lead with humor and heart, but Brooke never shies away from throwing in something extra naughty that will scandalize her conservative Southern family for life (bless their hearts).

She's a choc-o-holic, lives for eighties bands (which means she thinks guyliner is totally underrated), believes it's always wine o'clock, and lives with the coolest cat on the planet—her Ragdoll/Maine Coon mix, Jackson Agador Spartacus.

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